il ragazzo e il suo mostro

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il ragazzo e il suo mostro

by Phos

Summary

After escaping his tutors one morning, a twelve-year-old Will Graham finds himself wandering the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. There, he meets a strange man with a curious fascination for Botticelli and a sketchbook filled with nothing but the *Primavera* rendered over and over in reverent strokes of graphite.

(In which a young Will meets Il Mostro first.)

Notes

"The boy and his monster"

*chapter 1 edited as of 3.4.2022

*artwork was commissioned by a kind reader, @clytemenestra, some years ago now, and gosh, do I love it to this day!

Chapter 1

Will watched his hands in the bedroom mirror as he smoothed them down the front of his shirt. One of the maids had dressed him before breakfast: dark blue jacket, and a ribbon several shades lighter which hung in a limp bow beneath his collar. He raised two fingers to the glass, hovering them over the flat reflection of his flatter mouth. The corners of his lips spasmed once, twice, and when finally they lifted, dimpled. It didn't feel like smiles should—aching, at best stretched. The shape of it, though, was deceptively honest.

He didn't recognize himself.

Sighing, his eyes dropped. That smile sloughed off as tender flesh might bone. It was hardly noon, and already the day was taxing Will's control. All throughout, he'd been replacing one imitation with another. Happy, attentive, studious, caring. Each a far cry from genuine, slotting behind his eyes and across his features like the finest yet most tiresome forgery.

Over a breakfast of buttery cornettos, fette biscottate with jam, and a fresh platter of fruit, Signor Doemling had informed Will that his mother would be attending meetings well after lunch. As a treat, or perhaps a platitude, the courtyard doors were left open. The butler's pity, however, was so obviously fabricated that Will had avoided eye contact for the rest of his meal.

He'd avoided every other pair of eyes until he was ushered to his rooms to meet his first tutor of the morning, a frenchman who was teaching Will Italian, but whose penchant was to criticize Will's fluent—if accented—French.

Monsieur Lefebvre was a wiry, boar-faced man with a receding hairline. He hated his wife and liked to push their five-year-old daughter to the ground. Will hadn't learned this from the man's eyes; rather, he'd gleaned it from the minute twitch of Lefebvre's hands whenever Will bent to gather fallen worksheets from the floor. From the darkening stare Lefebvre once gave Will's knees after a flustered maid, chastising Will for tracking mud in from the courtyard, had rolled up his pant legs to reveal skin free of welts. It was a discomforting sort of knowledge. The same which slipped, unwanted, into Will's mind upon interacting with the servants and butler—their secrets laid bare whether he wanted to see them, was actively *trying* to see them, or not.

After Lefebvre had come Madam Gallo and lessons with the harpsichord. Math with Signor Greco, then art under another frenchman who expressed a fondness for fish in earth-toned watercolors and insisted that Will call him *Bernard, little master*, *not but Bernard.* The smiles Will practiced were for all of them, but some days he felt he might manage a real one, just for Bernard.

Still, the activities of the morning left Will weary, a low-grade irritation simmering beneath his skin at his tutors' more proper proclivities. He retreated from the mirror to his bedroom balcony, where he leant against the shadowed balustrade and surveyed the courtyard below. The ivy winding the pillars blushed a lurid crimson. With the pad of a pinky, Will traced one

such vine from leaf to leaf. The sun warmed his face, and abruptly, he missed New Orleans. He didn't dare miss his dad.

Another set of tutors were scheduled to arrive within the hour. Will hunched his shoulders, shriveling inward at the thought of more lessons, and for the first time in two years, he considered an escape; or at the very least, an afternoon of respite.

As an avenue of his art tutoring, Bernard once taught him about the art collections on public display in Florence, of which the Uffizi Gallery was, perhaps, the city's greatest pride. Bernard had laid out photographs of various artwork found within its glowing halls, their subjects ranging from sculptures to oil paintings to everything in between. The lesson came the previous Spring, Will's first spent at his mother's estate here in Italy. It was likely Bernard had forgotten—what good did it do to speak of the galleries, when Will was not permitted to leave the grounds?

But all this time, Will kept one of Bernard's photographs secreted beneath his mattress. It was not a color reproduction; rather, black and white. Even so, from the moment Will saw Botticelli's *La Primavera* , he'd been *enthralled* .

"The nymph Chloris, clothed in white," Bernard had explained, tapping at the two figures on the right side of the painting. "*She is seized by the winged Zephyrus, kidnapped and possessed, before they marry and she is transformed into a deity. She becomes the goddess of Spring and the eternal bearer of life."*

Will was not one for dreams, but he *was* one for nightmares. They started shortly before he left New Orleans and continued on in Paris, where even the finest linens and four-poster bed couldn't keep their terrors at bay. More frequently than not, Will glimpsed in them a feathered, antlered monster whose ribs protruded from beneath blue-black skin, and whose limbs were too slender for its ill-proportioned body. Sometimes, the monster followed him at so sedate a pace that the thud of its hooves mimicked a heartbeat, the echo of which dogged his steps through the dark forest that was his subconscious.

Other times, rather than follow after him, it did no more than watch him flee.

The latter was far worse. Because the monster didn't have eyes.

Will saw it there in the *Primavera*. Zephyrus, he thought. The pale blue god, favored with a recreation of the very moment its prey was caught.

To Bernard, Will had revealed nothing of this. A feigned delight curled his lips when in truth Will felt only empty, raw affinity. *Like to like.*

Now, Will abandoned the balcony to retrieve his prized photograph from atop his bedspread. Tucking it with utmost care between the pages of a book, he stashed both book and photo inside a backpack from his closet. A dangerous plan was forming in his mind: how he might sneak past the staff on the bottom floor. Preparations for lunch, in all likelihood, had already begun in earnest. His mother had scheduled a last-minute dinner party for the coming evening, and the kitchens were no doubt in chaos. In all the hubbub, surely no one would

notice Will slipping through the courtyard's back entrance gate. From there, an alley led out to the main street. He could walk to the Uffizi gallery on foot.

Plan of action decided, Will refused to wait a second longer. He shouldered his backpack then hoisted himself onto the balcony balustrade. The ivy hugging the stonework didn't give at his tug, and so he tightened his grip, inhaled a fortifying breath, and descended with light footholds. Once safely crouched in the shadow of the garden hedge, he peered into the courtyard beyond. The coast, it appeared, was clear.

Will made it to the gate without a hitch. That was to say, nobody came running out to yell at him. Such a small feat, yet never had he felt as victorious.

The lunch crowd had thinned considerably by the time Will reached the gallery. He entered, ticketless, by tailing a foreign tour group, and once inside, was relieved to find the myriad halls largely empty of visitors. Thus was he free to pace himself at any painting that managed to snare his curiosity.

The day was warm; before long, Will had pulled off his jacket and folded it over an arm. He was glad for the reprieve from the bustle outside. Glad for the quiet, the ease with which he could now study the art pieces without interruption. It reminded Will of afternoons spent waiting for his dad to return home from the boatyard, the late t.v. dinners they shared afterward, in the company of only comfortable silence and the scratch of plastic utensils on styrofoam plates.

The memory brought a wry twist to Will’s mouth, unbidden as he stared up at Leonardo Da Vinci’s portrait of *The Annunciation*. He rocked back on his heels and glanced a ways down the hall. He wondered when he would find the room which housed the *Primavera*, and had to tamp down the sudden wave of anxiety which flipped over his stomach.

It was surely impossible for his mother’s staff to track him here—in that respect, he had as much time as he needed to walk the gallery. But even so, Will could not know for certain when the maids would discover his absence. And the longer he was gone, the longer they would be frantically searching for him, his mother doubtless alerted.

Will was tired more than anything. Tired of forcing his emotions into slots where they *fit,* just so the staff who were his constant minders would not think him abnormal—*wrong*. Easier said than done, when only recently had he been forced to learn this charade. His dad had never made him feel strange, never forced Will to see a psychiatrist even when other parents might have.

So furiously did Will’s stomach ache now, his fists clenching in time with his quickened steps, that he didn’t immediately realize he’d entered the room at the end of the hall. The space was wide, its ceiling high and domed. The small offering of paintings hung within were

all of them vibrant, beautiful; however, they paled in comparison to the one set into the most distant wall.

The painting, *La Primavera*, was resplendent, noble in the orange and yellow lighting of the gallery. Larger, too, than the photograph had led Will to believe. It didn't fill the entire room, but looking at it, he felt as though it did. The trees, the flowers which graced the figures' heads and spilled from the nymph's open mouth—all of it he could only gaze at in awe.

Only then, breath held, did Will catch the faintest sound: the scratch of a pencil, so soft as to almost not be heard.

There was a bench before the *Primavera*, and on that bench sat a man.

He wore a dove-grey suit and posed primly over a sketchbook; the tilt to his head just *so*, each and every gesture he made along the page precise.

After a moment's deliberation, of hesitation, Will approached. In such a space where it was only they two, he deemed it only polite to meet the other's eyes and dip his chin in greeting. And so he rounded the bench, shifted his jacket to his lap, and claimed the opposite seat. There he mustered the courage to look across the scarce space between them.

The man was staring back.

Impossible, Will thought, for there was *nothing* in the man's dark eyes. The whispers which plagued Will's mind, his implacable empathy, were for once silenced. It should have worried him. It should have, but he felt only a singular curiosity, instead.

All this amounted to several seconds where Will held the man's gaze, before he finally dipped his chin and offered a timid pinch of his mouth, the corners of his lips flickering up briefly in lieu of a smile. For Will, it was as true as he had managed in a very long time.

The man said nothing, only stared with those eyes whose attention was like twin pricks of heat on Will's skin. Dissection, it felt like. Will's fingers twitched again.

Then the man returned the nod and promptly went back to sketching.

Will held fast to a sigh of relief. He folded his jacket across his lap and dug out one of the books in his bag. Its binding was worn brass, as was the plate which read *The Garden Wall* in delicate, curving French. For the first ten years of Will's life, it was all he had to remember the mother he never knew. She'd left it behind when she did the same to Will shortly after his birth; funny, to think it meant more before she was forced to come back for him, and whimsy became unadulterated truth.

Now Will kept the book because it reminded him of his dad. It was a winding, convoluted fairy tale about monsters which entered the dreams of children. For a long time, Will suspected it was a contributor to his own frequent nightmares.

Still, its sturdy binding made for the perfect place to stow Will's photo of the *Primavera*. He shook it free onto his lap and put the book aside again. With the real thing in front of him,

Will hoped to memorize the colors and create an image of it in his mind which he might call upon when looking at his little photo from now on.

Time passed, and Will tried not to preoccupy himself with counting the minutes. He looked at the painting, overwhelmed and pleased in turn, then he looked down at the black and white photo and back up again. He did this a number of times before finally tilting his head back and closing his eyes. Will could blur out the room, but he could not quite rid it of the pencil scratching against paper. He made due with what he could, bringing forth Venus and the folds of the nymph's delicate drapery from the dark. Then there were the others, and of course Zephyrus, who despite Will's attempts, would not appear to him without a tangle of antlers springing from his crown.

When he opened his eyes again, a soft hum slipped from his throat, wavering but happy. He turned his head to the side. The man was watching him.

Behind slightly parted lips, the man's tongue swiped along his teeth. Then in smoothly accented English he said, "May I ask what you are doing?"

Will returned his eyes to the painting. Breathed out a noiseless laugh. "Remembering this time."

When he looked over his shoulder at the man again, it appeared that Will's answer had surprised him. The man had leant back somewhat, straightened, and was running a thumb over a corner of his open sketchbook as he studied Will. Only now, the man looked far more studious than he had been of the painting minutes before.

"You don't know if you'll see it again," the man surmised.

"I'll see it in my mind," Will said. "The memory will be kinder than the photograph, I think." He indicated the black and white photo which he held with both hands.

The man nodded like this was the sanest thing ever spoken. Will doubted it made much sense to anyone but himself. Though if the man was an artist, surely he could appreciate the difference between the real thing and a reproduction even the highest caliber materials could not achieve.

The motion of the man's thumb caught Will's eye. Up until now, he had been careful to avoid peaking at the drawing. Still, his curiosity made him more forward in that moment than he would have dared otherwise. "May I see?" he asked, one hand already reaching as he spoke.

If the man thought Will presumptuous, he made no indication. In fact, he graced Will with an enigmatic smile which unfurled softly along his thin lips. Then, contrary to what Will would ever have expected from the man's poise and antiquated manner, he pulled the sketchbook toward his chest, effectively hiding the drawing from sight.

"In exchange for your name," the man said with a tilt of his head, "I might consider it."

"Will."

The man's eyes brightened, an inkling of mischief in shades of maroon.

Will huffed. "Will Gra—" He had to stop, correct himself. "William La Falce, but just 'Will' is fine."

There was no chance the man did not catch Will's slip. However, he made no comment on it.

"A pleasure, Will," the man returned, dutiful, as he handed the sketchbook over. "Hannibal Lecter."

Will tried not to be too greedy when he took hold of the offering, but he couldn't help it. Once the sketchbook was laid out over his jacket, Will ran his fingers down the sides of the off-white paper. His eyes roved the drawing quickly, then slowly a second time, and slower still a third. As he did so, he felt a certain energy emerge in his chest which spread outward to his arms and lower.

"Chloris and the biting wind of March," Hannibal said. "She is beautiful even as she tricks him into pursuing her."

"Charms," Will corrected idly, tracing the lines made by Hannibal's pencil with his eyes. The skill in the drawing was obvious; Hannibal excelled at the technical but flourished even more so at imbuing his own perspective of the scene. Though it was only these two figures that Hannibal had drawn, they were the two Will would have chosen himself. On the surface they were identical but different in the details. Where Botticelli portrayed a cool spring dream, Hannibal's rendition of the same in black graphite brought to mind a caricature of winter, Chloris made blissful and the god Zephyrus indulgent. Haunting, in place of the contentment the original inspired.

But Will could not criticize Hannibal for the artistic liberty, because this was how he saw it, too.

All too quickly, Will found himself flipping backward through the previous pages. Each was the same: the nymph and the god, coming together again and again, rendered with such reverence to the new faces Hannibal bestowed upon them.

"Thank you," Will murmured, and handed the sketchbook back to Hannibal, closed now.

Doubtless seeing the way in which Will had been affected, Hannibal inclined his head forward. "You're welcome, Will. Would that my art always had an audience with such similar feelings to my own."

It was with a start that Will realized he had lost track of the time. He needed to leave, and soon. But there was something about this place that made him resistant. It was not the painting, but perhaps it was Hannibal, and how easy it was to talk to him. Peaceful, almost. Will was unable to read Hannibal, and for that reason, his mind was left at peace. Like a fuzzed out space in a room full of static.

The idea of returning to his tutors, however... Will had to balk, his mind quivering in response. Not to mention the punishment that was sure to befall Will upon his return. Yes—

he should be leaving now.

The photo Will returned to the pages of *The Garden Wall*, and as he stood, he shoved his arms back into the sleeves of his jacket. Just as he was gathering up his bag, he was startled by the sound of Hannibal's voice.

"In a hurry?" Hannibal remarked coolly, eyes cast downward as he opened his sketchbook to a new page.

"I—I have to go," Will said, tripping over his words as he went. He was standing too close to Hannibal, he knew, making it much more obvious that he was wringing his hands. "I'm sorry. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Hannibal."

For an awkward stretch of time, Hannibal said nothing. Will forbade himself from rocking back nervously on his heels as was his tendency to do. From his place standing, the light from the gallery cast itself differently across Hannibal's face. In truth the man was not so old, not yet even twenty-five. Younger even than that.

What did Hannibal have to do with a kid, anyway? Will was a minor annoyance at best. A conversation did not make a friend, but that didn't stop his childish heart from yearning.

The scratch of Hannibal's pencil resumed once more. "Please, Will," he said without looking up. "Just 'Hannibal' is fine."

"Goodbye, Hannibal."

He did not wait for Hannibal to answer, moving for the room's entrance with such quick steps that he almost knocked into someone as he rounded into the hall.

"Excuse me, sir!" Will breathed out in a rush. It was an older fellow, heavy-set and with the look of the gallery security about him—but that wasn't right, it couldn't be. This man wore civilian clothes.

"No, no, it's my fault," he said, his Italian accent quite thick and slow. He had his large hands on Will's shoulders, and released Will an instant after. "So polite," he mused in the jovial way a father might. With one hand, he brushed past Will and gently pushed him toward the direction of the exit. "Run along now."

Will obeyed without a second thought. That was, until he was halfway down the hallway and had to stop, turning to regard the older man questioningly. Not a security guard, but the man stood like one. There, in the entrance to the room which held the *Primavera* and, undoubtedly, Hannibal still perched before it.

This man said nothing, only appeared to be considering something as he stared into the room. He lifted a hand to rub across his pursed mouth and the scruff which covered his jaw. The way his eyes were narrowed, gaze lowered, meant he was not looking at the painting.

Will watched the man for several minutes, before thinking better of it and turning once more to leave. How odd, Will thought. The man could not possibly be staring at Hannibal, but if he

was, Will could not find a single reason why not—there was something about the devout movement of Hannibal's pencil on the page of his sketchbook that would intrigue any man.

All the way home, Will found himself closing his eyes to recall the exact memory of the *Primavera,* now burned into a quiet room all its own within his mind. Though he did not see Hannibal there, nevertheless Will could hear the scratch of a pencil sketching out Botticelli's subtle brush strokes.

Will recalled the antlered Zephyrus and could not help but laugh giddily beneath his breath. This earned him strange looks from the people he passed, which he resolutely ignored.

Surely he would remember this time forever.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As luck would have it, Will was not missed for very long at all. By the time he was slipping back into the courtyard, one of the maids had discovered his absence only twenty minutes before. Will stepped out onto the stone path which led to the central fountain and spotted two of the garden-hands emerging from the rose bushes, a rapid conversation flowing between them in low, grumbling Italian. When they caught sight of Will, they rushed toward him, asking him where had he run off to, didn't he know the staff was being made to look everywhere for him?

Will did his best impression of the demure, confused boy who had gotten distracted on his way to the kitchen—the two men were glad enough to have found Will without too much time wasted that they did not care to question Will's sincerity. Soon they were ushering him back inside where the head of staff, Signor Doemling, was barking irately at a handful of maids in the foyer.

Signor Doemling was a long-time employee of Will's mother, though as their Florence butler he remained at the property here year-round, even when it was unoccupied during the winter months. He was old and greying, with grandchildren and two sons of his own who didn't keep in contact with their father. While not a very insensitive man, he was not one for unnecessary emotion. But Will had noticed in the past year a change for the better, wherein the butler spoke kindlier to Will than he had the previous spring.

This was how Will knew, in his way, that Signor Doemling had cancer.

When the garden-hands presented Will in the foyer, Signor Doemling pivoted round on his heel and gave Will a twitching, almost hunted once-over. Though it was obvious enough that Will's disappearance would cost the man his livelihood, Signor Doemling was surprisingly cordial in the face of his immediate return. His mother, Signor Doemling informed Will, did not know of it either, and if Will would please refrain from doing so again, he would not be forced to involve her.

The man was still twitchy and rather red in the face as he spoke, bringing guilt to weigh more heavily on Will's mind than anything else. Banished to his room that night, Will was served a sampling of the food that had been prepared for the dinner party in full swing on the lower floor. Signor Doemling thought this a fit enough punishment—his mother would not notice his absence from the party, either way. Will made no attempt to correct him.

After, the night stretched out before him and Will slept fitfully.

The next morning was a Tuesday which meant bright and early, a maid woke Will for breakfast and dressed him in more of his mother's preferred tailoring—today's jacket being more grey than blue—and soon Will found himself seated at the parlor dining table, hardly able to keep his eyes open.

Grumpiness didn't suit him so early in the morning, but Will couldn't help it—Monsieur Lefebvre would be arriving on the hour, well enough reason for Will to be picking at his food despondently. Now that he'd had sufficient time to toss and turn all night, he realized that there was the possibility that he was emotionally drained after yesterday's ups and downs. Anything that might require stringent attention this morning would only prove overstimulating. Especially if Will was to meet with Monsieur Lefebvre, whose idea of a comprehensive lesson involved timed writing drills and a long rod the man thoroughly enjoyed slapping on the table whenever Will became lost in thought.

Lefebvre was by no means a large man, but watching him ramble into the drawing room which connected to Will's bedroom brought to mind a bull-headed animal, something rash and poor in manner—piggish. Sweat wetted the man's brow, which he dabbed at absently with a wrinkled handkerchief as he set his briefcase down on the table.

"Bonjour, young sir," Lefebvre said, meeting Will's eyes only briefly before pulling out a stack of worksheets. Another thing Will disliked about the man—he did not think highly of Will, more noticeably after the mud incident in the garden several weeks beforehand. In Lefebvre's mind, Will had been meticulously sorted into the same box as his own daughter.

It made the man bold.

"Morning," said Will. He took his usual seat at the head of the long table, and spent an entire minute blinking furiously down at his hands. "*Wake up*," Will whispered to himself, irritable and sluggish.

"What was that?"

Will straightened. "Nothing."

Lefebvre hummed, unconvinced. "Right. Well, here we are. First I would like you to answer a few questions on the reading from yesterday."

A worksheet slid Will's way. Exhausted, he could do little more than reach for it and hope the words did not appear too much like gibberish.

This continued for half an hour. More worksheets, Lefebvre's hemming and hawing over every misconjugation and misplaced article, and then finally a pointed conversation in which the man spoke slow as a goat, as if daring Will to correct him for assuming Will's ineptitude with the language.

"Hai visto il giornale di oggi?" Lefebvre prompted.

"I—I'm sorry. Could you please repeat that?" Will stammered.

As was his usual in the company of his tutors, Will kept his gaze fixed to the man's chin, never making eye contact. After a while, even the newest tutors came to accept this as just one of Will's many eccentricities; however, Lefebvre was clearly irritated by it now. His wooden rod came down on the table an inch from Will's fingers. It was a teaching aid, one

meant for the rolling chalk board the tutors had access to for their lessons, but now the rod was taking the place of an incentive. *Be a good boy and pay attention.*

The sharp crack of it on the polished tabletop had Will instinctually pulling back in his seat. Not a flinch, but to Lefebvre, who was a stupid man to begin with, it couldn't be anything but.

There was a flicker of something dangerous in the man's eyes. His hand adjusted on the rod, and Will saw in that small movement the man's unsettled need to *push* brought to the surface. What do you do? Will wondered. What do you do when she flinches from you?

"Sit down," Monsieur Lefebvre ordered, a fine line between aggravated and unnerved. Said so pointedly that Will was brought back to the present moment, and abruptly found that he had risen from his chair and taken a step closer to stare at Lefebvre's hands. The man tapped the table several times with his rod, jerked his head toward Will's vacated seat. "Sit and answer correctly this time."

Will could not say what made him do it. Just when Lefebvre was raising the rod to crack it hard against the table again, Will shot a hand out to catch it. He did not quite connect—Lefebvre had shot out his other hand a half-second after, and with faster reflexes that allowed him to grab hold of Will's arm with his fat, claw-like fingers.

"You're hurting me," Will did not whimper, only said so low that it was almost a whisper, his eyes jumping back up to Lefebvre's chin.

Will did not attempt to cry out. He didn't pull away from Lefebvre or shove at the man's tightening grip. He merely studied the man, casually unaffected, while knowing full well that the hastily contrived boredness on his face would anger Monsieur Lefebvre far more. This was by design. He wanted to know what Lefebvre would do.

Perhaps it was Will's indifference which made Lefebvre remember where he was. For the man seemed to return to himself, ruffled feathers settling, and released Will's arm to straighten the cuffs of his expensive suit jacket.

It was the first sign of a practiced predator, Will knew. When to pick your battles. Monsieur Lefebvre looked almost embarrassed, as though he had not expected to come so easily undone, and on his richest client, no less. Will guessed such a loss of control had never happened to the man.

Not wanting to encourage Lefebvre, Will returned to his seat and resumed their conversation as if nothing had happened. All the while though, he could not quite shake the image of the man's young daughter from his mind. Will may have acted unbothered, but the reality was quite the opposite. His stomach rolled uncomfortably, and he knew he hated Lefebvre. He hated how men like him could live their lives just as they ruined the lives of their children. And even then, they could get away with murder.

Hours after Monsieur Lefebvre left for the day, the ache had climbed into Will's chest and burned there.

Will ended up having his lunch much earlier than normal. When he caught a maid passing in the hall outside his room, he told her he was hungry because his stomach had been upset at breakfast—not necessarily a lie. This was how he managed to curl up by himself on his bed with a simple toasted sandwich, the creased pages of the morning newspaper spread out on the duvet and a glass of water on his nightstand.

Il Mostro di Firenze colpisce ancora! read the front headline in bold, creeping letters.

The Monster of Florence strikes again.

He had not wasted time reading the article, for his attention was instantly held captive by the grainy image printed halfway down the page. Two more murders, sculptural in their mutilation, were found last night in the bed of a pickup truck in Impruneta. The theatrical arrangement fell in line with similar murders that the police had discovered over the previous month, and now several departments of the Italian governmental branch were dedicated to furthering the investigation.

Though the camera angle was lower, the photograph no doubt taken from the ground at the foot of the truck, Will knew immediately what the arrangement was supposed to be. He had studied it time and again, held it in his own hands and *felt* it, seen it with his own eyes in the Uffizi Gallery just yesterday. Will would recognize the *Primavera* anywhere and in any form.

A form and media that, here, was as horrifying as it was beautiful.

The article gave no mention of Botticelli, meaning the police had not been so quick to the same connection that Will made with ease. Will's chest ached differently now, squeezing. He wouldn't lie and say he was not infinitely awed by the care put into the display. But just as he was stunned by it, he was also repulsed. The couple was already identified as two professors from a university in Florence. The woman lay down with her expression blissful, mouth hanging open in death, her naked chest covered haphazardly in a blanket that on-scene police must have hoped would save her the indignity—underneath, Will hardly need see to know that her breast was exposed, tastefully obscured by the garland of flowers which spilt from her lips.

She had been bludgeoned. The man was drowned. This was clear from the sallow, grey coloring of his skin which was noticeable even in such a poor quality photograph. Bloated, he reached for her. Just as Zephyrus did in the *Primavera*.

Will shut his eyes tightly as the newspaper slipped from his slackened fingers. His breathing grew ragged, and he clutched his knees to his chest, his lunch forgotten in the wake of the nausea which overcame him.

In his mind a silver pendulum swung in darkness. He waited until the pendulum was still.

I meet them at a university function and I immediately dislike them. She is insolent and insults the host's family, the restaurant catering, the guests she does not approve of. He dithers and neither agrees nor refutes, but they are married and he follows behind her always with his tail curled between his legs.

I make conversation and get to know them, their outward faces and the names they share with their parents and parents' parents. I wait, and I plan, and I follow them home many a night later.

She must go first because she is to be Chloris, the illicit charm of her becoming guiding her husband to his own death. She does not die how I plan. She sees me before I strike and for that I must strike sooner. She lays peacefully in the kitchen while I find him in the study. She dies there but he does not, for that comes after, when I drown him in his own tub and remove them both before stiffness can settle in.

She does not deserve the dignity I grant her, but she is not the subject. She is a character, and I arrange her to honor, not to represent her own faults and impurities. I place him beside her, his arms out in preparation to grasp and seize, starved, while she remains just out of reach.

They will serve to honor the first spring now.

This is my design.

Will came back to himself minutes later, dry-eyed and alert, though he felt as if it had been hours since he had closed them. His bedroom was still bright with the slanted, early afternoon sunlight which entered through his windows and pooled across his sheets.

Most of what he saw were impressions and sensations, barely-there reflections of the truth. His own understanding of the Botticelli made the tableau that much clearer, and yet it also felt as though Will had arranged the couple with his owns hands. That had never happened before.

A vague and unfocused fear tickled the back of Will's neck, the fine hairs at his nape rising to stand on end. As much as he shouldn't, he wanted to see the real *Primavera* again. He thought, perhaps, that it might help him see this killer's face.

Why though did he feel such an instantaneous connection? Was it the understanding of the painting, and all it stood for, implicit in Il Mostro's display? Will never intended to see the things he saw. He never purposefully *looked*, but for the first time, he wanted to. *He wanted to look*.

And to do that, Will needed to see the *Primavera* one more time. He would have to sneak out again.

It was only nearing midday—around the exact time that Will managed to escape the grounds the day prior. The staff would be carrying out their usual rotation, which only made sense; Will could take advantage of the same loophole. Given the risk, this time would have to be the last.

With delicate precision Will began tearing along the photo of the murdered couple until it was free of the newspaper. It was slightly larger in his hands than the black and white *Primavera*, flimsier too, and easily torn if he wasn't careful. That in mind, Will gave it the same treatment he'd given the *Primavera* photograph yesterday and slipped it between the flat pages of *The Garden Wall*.

The way to the gallery was not new to him, this time. Twenty minutes later he found himself traversing its wide halls once again, already wary of the large crowd he had not anticipated being here today. Tourists loitered near the entrances and doorways and slowed Will down considerably. Their presence was cloying, the halls almost stifling, so much so that Will had to divest himself of his jacket, push his sleeves up messily to his elbows, and tug at the top button of his collar for relief.

The room that held the *Primavera* was just as he had left it.

The painting, beautiful in the glow of the gallery.

And on the bench in front of it, sat in the same spot as yesterday—Hannibal Lecter.

Warmth crawled up Will's neck, not from the gallery, but from the sight of the very man he hadn't thought he would ever forget.

Hannibal was so concentrated on his drawing that, to him, his sketchbook may have been the only thing that existed in the world. It almost felt wrong to interrupt. Still, Will was better off getting the embarrassment of his return to the gallery out of the way while he still had time to linger.

When Will cleared his throat, the sound was not as subtle as intended though it had the desired effect. Hannibal's pencil paused mid-stroke. However, the man did not turn around; Hannibal lifted his head up to stare at the *Primavera* while keeping the rest of his body held perfectly, inhumanly still. Will saw only the back of Hannibal's head and nothing else.

Not so poised now, Will thought. He could not be certain, not with how difficult Hannibal was to read, but the oddest sense of anticipation washed over Will in that moment. As though Hannibal was not only listening with the whole of his molecules, not so much as breathing, but lying in wait as well.

A group of tourists shuffled by outside, creating in their wake a gust which buffeted Will as it pushed inside the room. The change in the air was instantaneous. The tightness Will only now noticed in Hannibal's shoulders fell away, and Hannibal tilted his head *just* so, that he might appraise Will.

"Did you know that you have a very singular scent?" Hannibal mused, a barely-there crook in the corner of his mouth. "Furniture polish, I believe. And apples."

Will exhaled noisily and plopped down on the bench next to Hannibal. *How eccentric*, his mother would have tittered. He and Hannibal had that in common.

"You came back after all.” Hannibal had resumed sketching yet another iteration of Chloris and Zephyrus. Will, meanwhile, could do little else but sit beside him, feeling strangely unbalanced.

"I needed to be sure of something.”

Hannibal lifted pencil from paper, flicked his eyes over to Will. *Go on*, his steady stare seemed to indicate.

For reasons Will could not begin to explain or understand, he felt suddenly nervous. *It's stupid*, Will told himself. *This is stupid. Why did I come back?*

"Perhaps I can be of some help?" Hannibal again prompted. Nothing in his eyes that suggested impatience, nor exasperation. In this way, Hannibal was wholly unlike Will's tutors. He did not push, and he did not rush.

Hannibal wouldn't think it stupid, Will knew. Nor would he judge.

Wordlessly, Will retrieved *The Garden Wall* from his bag and opened it to the newspaper clipping. Then he picked it up and passed it to Hannibal, a swift exchange of hands.

A moment eked by, wherein he allowed Hannibal the chance to study the photo. All the while, Will did not dare look upon Hannibal's face, so certain was he that he would see disdain there.

"She was rude," Will offered by way of an answer, speaking now to his lap. He wrinkled his nose in distaste. "The Zephyrus in the painting would not want her."

Finally, the cushion creaked as Hannibal shifted toward Will. "How astute," he remarked lowly. "Surely he wouldn't, would he?"

Will chanced an upward glance, and was met with Hannibal's open, undivided regard. Heat rushed to fill his cheeks. He coughed, ducking his head to hide his furious blush. Hannibal had just called him *clever*. It was gratifying to have his theory met with approval.

“Perhaps,” began Hannibal, his voice dipping down the depths of his register, “this killer is also honoring his victims. He chooses them for their rudeness so that they may be bettered for it. What good would a transformation be without change, a beginning and an end?”

Will's eyes widened, breath stalled in his throat.

Hannibal wielded a disarming smile. “Just a theory, of course.”

For a while, Will did not say anything in response, leading Hannibal to merely watch him, head cocked. Could Hannibal...? But surely *not*. A familiar ache webbed outward from the center of Will's chest, and he lifted one arm to rub at it, the move unconscious.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Hannibal go still again. The same stillness as earlier where it did not look as if the man was even breathing, but with a quality to it that was

characterized by a swooping drop in temperature. The room, comfortably warm before now, felt as though it was thirty degrees colder.

"May I see your arm?" Hannibal asked, polite.

He was no longer looking at Will. He was looking at the bruises which had become stark, purpling imprints against Will's pale skin, hardly a few hours past. Which meant the shape of Lefebvre's fingerprints there would be truly ghastly by tomorrow.

Instead of acquiescing, Will held his arm more guardedly against his chest. With difficulty, he tamped down on his trembling worry, and pointedly ignored Hannibal. "Who are you?" he asked unsteadily.

"Your arm, Will." The tone of Hannibal's voice was not quite demanding, not like Monsieur Lefebvre's had been, and certainly not unkind. That was another difference between the two men; Hannibal did not demand, he remained steadfastly polite, gentle in his urging.

When Will only tightened his jaw and held his gaze, Hannibal sighed, relenting, "Currently, I am a student attending medical school in France."

Like a roof giving way, Will's tension flew out in a hot gush of released breath. What had Will been *thinking?* He did not relax completely, but he deflated at the admittance.

"You're not from here?"

Hannibal gave a minute tilt of his head. "Only visiting. I find Florence a symbol of an intellectual time long past and cannot say I regret exploring the city to its fullest."

"How long?"

"Two weeks room and board. The hospitality of a family friend."

Finding these answers acceptable, Will nodded. "Okay," he said, and stretched his arm out toward Hannibal, turned up so that the bruises were most pronounced beneath the gallery lights.

If Hannibal was at all concerned with being dealt the third degree, the feeling was immediately lost in the face of Will's injury. He raised his hands, waiting, until Will rested the requested arm upon them. Hannibal made no other movement to touch the bruise, merely studied it a moment, his hands very warm where he held Will in place.

"I can't be here for long," Will told him, reminded now of what he originally came for. He hoped saying so might discourage Hannibal from continuing... whatever this was. "I have just a little time to stay."

Hannibal seemingly ignored this, for he did not answer.

"It's not pretty."

“I disagree,” Hannibal said at length, his hands dropping back to land on his sketchbook, though it was his eyes which lingered, sweeping like a physical touch along the bruised skin as they parted. “The body’s response to violent stimulus can often be quite beautiful. Adrenaline, oxytocin. We advance ourselves to limits defined only by cause and effect, our reactions to the actions of others. A bruise may be ugly in one sense but pretty in another. Thinking one way, you might say your blood is that much closer to the surface.”

“I can see my blood,” Will said, eyeing the bruise closely before rolling his sleeve back down over it. Then he thought better of the words, corrected, “A lot of blood. But it’s still inside me.”

Did that not make skin the furthest limit of the body?

When he looked over at Hannibal, the man had already returned to his sketching. The newspaper clipping lay on the bench between them.

After a minute, Hannibal said, “You were concerned with the time?”

Will huffed a laugh. “Just a moment,” he said, and turned to bask in the *Primavera* for a few minutes more.

Chapter End Notes

Hai visto il giornale di oggi - Have you seen the newspaper today?
Il Mostro di Firenze colpisce ancora! - The Monster of Florence strikes again!

Chapter 3

The Piazza della Signoria lay half in shadow when Will exited the gallery. In the shade of the columns and the narrow streets, the day was pleasantly cool and muted. Grey clouds edged the expanse of sky that was visible over the square, bringing with them the promise of rain in the coming evening. Though the weather had not yet made a turn for the worse, Will inhaled deeply and felt a heady stickiness sliding down into his lungs.

In a fit of whimsy, Will decided to walk through the Loggia dei Lanzi before leaving. If this was to be his last visit to the Palazzo, he wanted a chance to see the outdoor selection of sculptures Bernard had once told him of. Thankfully, there were very few tourists nearby, only a young couple with their sleeping baby in a stroller, planted before the steps beneath the curved arches.

By far Will's favorite had to be Benvenuto Cellini's statue of Perseus holding aloft the decapitated head of Medusa, victorious and yet with his own head tilted downward in deference. Will had to lean forward to peruse the bronze panels at the base, which depicted the story of Perseus and Andromeda to go along with the statue. However, when Will straightened to stand again, he felt the air shift behind him.

"*Mi scusi*," came the words in Italian from over Will's shoulder. "Might I have a small piece of your time?"

It was the Italian man whom Will had encountered outside the room which housed the *Primavera* the day before. Today the man was wearing a shabby suit and an oddly patterned tie—a silvery spiral of flowers set against a bright, shimmery red.

"Would you walk with me?" the man asked amiably, teeth white, and with a hopeful smile parting his mouth. Will met the man's eyes in a quick upward jerk before returning to his study of the man's tie. The man did not have a dishonest face, but one softened by full meals and laugh lines. "You are not in trouble," the Italian man continued, having noticed Will's hesitance and misreading it as shyness. "I simply recognized you from the other day. You have an appreciation for the beauty of Botticelli's *Primavera*, yes?"

Will said nothing, and stared.

The man was contemplative for a moment, then he reached into the inner breast pocket of his suit. "Apologies, I am Inspector Pazzi. I'm a policeman working to catch a very bad man. Would you like to see my identification?"

Will's eyes narrowed at the choice of language; Pazzi spoke as one would to a very young child. The man also did not wait for an answer, already flipping open his wallet to reveal the badge of the Italian Polizia, and beside it—*Pazzi, Rinaldo*. A picture of his face with slightly less lines around the mouth and eyes.

"I believe you," Will told him.

This brought a crinkle to Pazzi's eyes. He moved one foot back so as to open the way for Will to move past him, head tilted in the direction of the Loggia dei Lanzi's steps. "Care to sit down? For a moment of your time only, of course."

Not long after, Will found himself perched on the gallery steps with Pazzi folding down beside him. They both looked out over the square, the people walking the streets and the pigeons flocking the ground near the arches.

"I take it you have heard of Il Mostro," Pazzi began. "There are not many who have not these past weeks. This madman is causing quite the scare."

Having tuned the man out while he listened to the pigeons flutter and coo, Will had to stop himself from startling. Of all things, surely he should have expected this to be what Pazzi wanted from him.

Pazzi continued, undeterred, "Il Mostro creates images that stay in the mind. It is his custom to arrange his victims like a beautiful painting."

Will considered his response carefully. He nodded, all the while feeling the weight of Pazzi's eyes. "I noticed—the Botticelli?"

"Yes, just like the Botticelli." A reprieve followed, where Pazzi turned to watch the pigeons, as well. Then the man sighed, and the noise was so tired, so very drained that Will had to look at him in silent question.

"Success," Pazzi said, "comes as a result of inspiration. Revelation is the development of an image, first blurred, then coming clear." He raised his eyebrows, turned once more to watch Will. "I require help with my interpretation of the art Il Mostro is transforming in his image. I have only theories at this point, as I believe my feelings regarding the two figures from the painting are missing something of great importance."

At the foot of the steps, a few pigeons chased crumbs which the wind had displaced from the stone cracks.

"They are reverent," Will offered without elaboration.

For such an outwardly unremarkable man, Pazzi had an enviable awareness and a far sharper mind. He would wait for his answer until the silence between them grew uncomfortable, and even longer after that.

Will released a short breath, not quite a sigh, and searched for the newspaper clipping which he had shoved into the pocket of his jacket. "The people who were killed, in the paper," he said as he showed it to Pazzi. "I saw them in the picture and I knew it was the *Primavera*."

"But?"

"They were... irreverent."

Pazzi's eyebrows shot up much higher than before. His surprise was genuine, and Will felt proud to have pulled it from a police investigator. "You believe this is why he chooses them?"

Pazzi asked.

In a room in his mind, Will saw the *Primavera* as it still hung in the gallery. Then the colors fled, rushing outward to the edges of its frame and seeping down the walls. In their place, the figures were rendered in the black graphite of Hannibal's drawings.

"I don't know what I believe."

This was acceptable enough to Pazzi, for he nodded. Will had given him more than enough to work off of from here.

"We are astonishingly alike, you and I," Pazzi said. "You might make a fantastic detective one day."

Will watched the pigeons and smoothed his hands over his pants, away from his lap. No matter what qualities they may have shared, he knew that Pazzi would not see Will's hands there, clenched against his knees.

Ridding himself of Inspector Pazzi's company proved more difficult than Will anticipated. The afternoon slid by as they talked in the square, and Will stayed longer than he should have while he could use Pazzi as an excuse to do so. But it would be remiss of him to ignore how much time had passed—over an hour now since he left the house, and with a long walk ahead of him to get back.

This did not put Pazzi off. In fact, when he learned that Will would be walking home alone, the man asked if he could join him, a stroll enjoyed in the cool heat of the day while it outlasted the rain. From what Will could tell, the request was made only with Pazzi's good intentions in mind. It had been established already that Will could trust him. And then there was their conversation on the steps, which had been informative, to say the least. Will had a vested interest in Il Mostro now—he would not give up a chance to see further into the investigation if Pazzi was willing to divulge that information.

But as they began their walk together down a cobbled side-street, this was not the topic that Pazzi pursued. The man's gait was much slower than Will's, meaning Will had to pull back somewhat. Intuitively, he knew that this was feigned and that the walk to his mother's home was being intentionally dragged out.

"I notice you are not a tourist, but you speak English and have that look about you," Pazzi said, squinting up in the cuts of sunlight which broke through the rooftops as he and Will passed them. "Are you by chance from America?"

"My dad was," Will replied. He kicked at a large round rock that had entered his path and sent it skittering out into the street. "I live with my mother now."

“Divorced?”

“Dead.”

Pazzi gave him an odd look, considering but free of judgement. Then he was glancing away, scratching at the scruff alongside his neck. "Like Il Mostro, there are not many that have not heard of the La Falce Familia,” Pazzi commented. This was said airily, but it had Will coming to an abrupt stop, stood stock still in the middle of the street. Pazzi stopped as well, and turned round to flick his eyes over Will’s clothes, from the shoulders of his fitted jacket to his clean, brand new shoes. “Italian and French high class. Yet you feel that your expensive clothing does not suit you and you are adverse to eye contact."

“How did you know?” Will asked, his voice gone so soft that it was nearly lost in the bustle of people and cars around them.

Pazzi tapped the side of his head. “Investigator. But it was not too difficult,” he knocked his chin toward the flap of Will’s bag. “You have your family crest, there.”

Sure enough, the dark blue crest stood out plainly against the brown of Will’s satchel. Two leaves which curled to intercross a sickle.

“I never did tell you my name,” Will admitted.

A low, chuffing laugh came in answer, then Pazzi indicated the street ahead of them with his arm. They began walking again. “And to whom am I speaking?” Pazzi asked in good humor.

Will hesitated, tasting the words in his mind before he allowed himself to speak them aloud. It had been a long time since he had. “Will Graham,” he said finally.

After that, the both of them seemed to become more subdued. Pazzi lost in thought, while Will was much the same, thinking of everything and nothing, his dad’s work-roughened hands, the tire swing which had hung from the branches of a tree in their front yard. Sometimes the two images blurred together and Will felt wind upon his face. But that was real—the breeze which even now was picking up in the street, carrying itself through balconies and under bridges until it reached him.

“There was a man with you, too, when you sat before the *Primavera*,” Pazzi said suddenly, like the thought had just occurred to him. “Tell me, what is he like?”

“Hannibal?” Will had to wonder aloud, skeptical, before looking at Pazzi with dumbfounded confusion and a frown. What did Hannibal have to do with anything?

They rounded into the next street, and Pazzi was quick to reassure, “Another avenue of questioning I might pursue, much like I have now with you. Nothing more.”

Will felt his brows furrow. He could not help but think that Hannibal would not be as receptive to Pazzi as he had been himself; something about Pazzi’s depth of questioning, that of a policeman who prodded rather than nurtured. It was different with Will because in him

Pazzi saw little more than a child. For that reason alone, Hannibal would find Pazzi distasteful.

“I don’t really know him,” Will said. “He was there yesterday and today, but... he was thoughtful, and I liked his drawings.” Affecting a shrug, Will hoped that Pazzi would not force anything more than that. It was almost too personal, what Will had discussed with Hannibal. Something private, just between them, that Will was too protective of to talk about. For so long, Will felt as though there was nothing in this new life he was forced to inhabit that he could call his own. Their moments shared with the *Primavera* were the scantest pieces that he had.

Pazzi, however, did not stop there. “And you questioned this man? You asked him about the Botticelli murder?”

It was fortunate that Will was not made to answer, for a car horn sounded at the intersection ahead, deafening and dragging and punctuated by the squeal of tires braking in one sudden lurch. Will rushed ahead of Pazzi and ignored the man’s calls of his name, weaving through the stunned spectators emerging from stores and bakeries to assess the commotion. In the middle of the intersection, a pickup truck loaded with sacks of dirt had veered over the opposite lane and hit another car. Smoke streamed from its engine, and several men in work overalls jumped from the bed of the truck yelling in crisp, angry Italian.

In the slew of dust and dirt that was kicked up in the air from the collision, and the subsequent force which caused several of the sacks to burst, a long shape crawled out from beneath the place where the truck’s bumper lay crushed in the fold of the other’s passenger-side door. It limped in the direction of the corner where Will stood watching, and Will’s heart plunged straight down to his stomach. It was a dog. The truck had not killed it in the crash, but one of its back legs was bloodied, the golden brown coloring of its fur obscured there, wet with rust.

“No!” Will called out, when he saw one of the men from the truck circle around the bed to grab it. Instead of running, the dog whined and slid to the ground, growling when the same man picked up the end of the rope which hung from its neck.

Pazzi chose that moment to catch up to Will, not quite yet panting but certainly straining for breath. He must have seen the decision written on Will’s face moments before Will had made it himself, because then he was taking another step forward to block the scene from view. “Wait,” Pazzi started, “Will—”

But Will wasn’t listening. He dodged Pazzi, and hurtled towards the man who was now pulling on the rope to get the dog to stand.

“*No*,” Will said, falling to his knees by the dog’s side. He took hold of the rope where it wrapped around the dog’s neck, his fingers fitting around the tight knot of it and thus preventing the man from tugging. “My dog,” Will said, and found he was unable to form any other words but those two. His mind had whited out under the weight of his emotion, and he was trembling. “*My dog*.”

It was impossible to know if the man even understood English. However, the problem was effectively avoided altogether when Pazzi came rushing over seconds after. Pazzi then launched into a fast but short-lived conversation with the other man, after which the man angrily shouted a few terse, sharp words and threw up his hands before walking back to the smoking truck.

“That was very reckless,” Pazzi sighed, his words coming slow, weary and aching as he dropped into a crouch at Will’s side. They were still very much in the middle of the street, and there were still more people arriving around them to watch the scene from afar. “I have convinced this man that we are taking the dog to get help. He is glad to be rid of it, circumstances notwithstanding. But we must leave immediately.”

Will was too shaken to protest the suggestion. He and Pazzi ended up walking the rest of the way with the dog limping several paces behind him, the rope grown slack between them though Will held on tightly. If the dog was smaller, Will would have carried it. Alas, he was forced to rely on adults for such things, and he did not dare to ask Pazzi. It was clear enough that Pazzi was displeased with this turn of events—the man’s jaw worked, and he scratched at his beard again in what Will recognized as a sort of nervous tic. Pazzi would not say as much, of course, though it would not have mattered. Will felt no obligation to placate, or apologize. It was just a thing that was.

“This is you?” Pazzi asked needlessly, when Will came to a stop in front of the marble steps which led up to the house’s grand double doors. The building was enormous, made up of pale stone which faced outward into the avenue, an expensive area of the city not far from the university.

Rather than answer, Will ducked his head to look down at the dog. It had a mottled coloring, brown and gold and darker patches which were much like the colors of the leaves in New Orleans for the first months of fall. It slumped to the ground at Will’s feet, a whining cry in its throat as it nudged Will’s hand with a cold, wet nose.

“I cannot take the dog from here,” Pazzi said, pity in his voice and in his eyes. Will hated it, but hated himself more for being unable to look up and face the man. “I assume you will not be able to, either.”

“No,” Will said to his shoes.

Something entered into his vision—Pazzi held out a small slip of paper between two fingers. On that paper was a phone number. "You are a bright boy, Will,” he said in obvious dismissal. This was where they parted ways. “If anything else comes to mind, I would appreciate being enlightened."

In the end, Pazzi did not leave Will there when he very well could have. He walked Will to the door and, more surprising than anything, he *lied* for Will. There was a moment in time where Will was made to feel incapable and painfully infantilized, and that was when the doors opened to reveal the cavernous foyer and Signor Doemling stood within, the butler’s expression grave as he noted the police officer on the doorstep. *The boy*, Pazzi had husked in his deep baritone voice. *He found the dog after it wandered into your garden. Do not blame the boy, he only wanted to get help.*

That help being Pazzi, which was proven to Signor Doemling with a flash of Pazzi's badge. Finally, Pazzi had promised to take the dog from there, and tipped his head to Will in farewell. However, it would appear that Pazzi was not yet done with Will—fifteen minutes later and after a thorough talking to by Signor Doemling, who pressed upon Will the danger of approaching stray dogs and wandering off on his own, Will escaped into the courtyard garden and to the tall iron gate which lead into the alley. No one had noticed Will's absence from the house this time, and Signor Doemling was inclined to believe Pazzi when the officer said it had been no more than half an hour at most. Thus Will was let off easy, and straight back to the garden he went.

At the gate, the dog poked its nose through the bars and snuffled at the grass. Pazzi leant against the far mouth of the alley, and when Will spotted him, eyes widening, Pazzi gave one final salute before disappearing back into the street.

In the growing dark of the turning evening, he brought the dog into the garden and then to a far corner, where it could remain hidden from the gardeners for at least several days. Though the greyest of the clouds thickened and thinned, a light drizzle started. Will hurried to find a cardboard box thrown out by the maids, as well as two salad bowls stolen from beneath the noses of the kitchen staff already busy with dinner preparations. One bowl he filled with water from the rusted-over garden faucet, the other with scraps of the sandwich he'd been too nauseous from his study of Il Mostro's murders earlier in the day to finish.

Will hid the cardboard box beneath the rose bushes and stuffed it with pillowcases from his own bed. The maids would question him about this tonight, but he did not care—Will was tired, annoyed by all that he had let Pazzi do for him and loathsome of his own dependence. He would do what he could for the dog now, but he knew it couldn't last when it was very hurt, and in pain. That knowledge wounded Will most of all.

He went to bed that night exhausted to the bone, after-images of the afternoon dancing behind his eyes, Il Mostro's bloated and blissed-out victims, the *Primavera*, Hannibal, and then Pazzi in the square with the pigeons, until finally sleep came for him.

Will awoke in darkness. The doors which led out to his balcony were cracked, spilling faded, milk-white moonlight across the floorboards. He pushed up on his elbows then into a sitting position, and listened. There were no trees big enough in the garden to shift and creak, but all the same, he heard a small and almost inaudible snap through the wall.

It could be the dog, he told himself. But it wasn't the dog. Will turned the sound over in his mind as if weighing it in his palms. He knew that it had been deliberate, controlled to the last detail. The quality of it was different in his head, meaning there must have been another such sound which had woken him from sleep.

Before doubt could creep back inside his mind, he slipped from the sheets and padded over to the balcony doors. Will wore only a plain t-shirt, a leftover from his life in America, and the

chill touch of the nighttime air made him shiver. He stepped out onto the balcony and pressed up against the balustrade, peering down into the garden.

Hannibal Lecter stared up at Will. His eyes were the only part of him which glistened in the unremarkable light, bright whites and the darkened shadows clustered in his pupils. He stood with his hands at his sides and his head tilted slightly back, immaculate hair displaced by the two thin strands fallen over his forehead.

“Did you follow me home?” Will asked, incredulous.

Hannibal’s lips ticked upward into the slightest of smiles. “I worried I would not find you again,” he said, and it was rather strange, how Hannibal did not need to raise his voice for it to reach Will. He lifted one arm to reveal a large book held in his hand. “To return this, only. I could not find reason to think it is not important to you.”

It should have been odd, finding Hannibal here. And yet Will did not find it so. He only felt a crushing, desperate gratitude, for the book Hannibal held in offering was *The Garden Wall*. Somehow, with all that happened at the gallery and with Pazzi, Will had not discovered that he’d left it behind. His satchel lay at the foot of his bed, undisturbed since he hastily threw it there before he’d left to carry his pillowcases back down to the garden.

“Give me a second,” Will said, pushing up to sit on the balustrade and swinging his legs over the edge. If Hannibal was surprised by this, or even worried for Will’s safety, he said nothing, only watched as Will grabbed onto the ivy and climbed down.

Once his feet were safely planted on the ground, Will spun around and had to jump backward a step. Hannibal stood much closer than he had appeared to be from the balcony. And to Will, who had never seen Hannibal anywhere but seated on the bench in the gallery, the difference in their heights was rather dazing at first. It didn’t bother Will, not really, but the way in which they spoke together—on equal footing, sharing in their appreciation for the *Primavera*—was not something anybody else would expect to pass between them so easily.

“Your book,” Hannibal prompted, his tone that of someone thoroughly amused. Will was embarrassed to find that he had been staring at Hannibal for some time. Unlike Will, he was still dressed, and quite lavishly at that—another suit, this one an almost black shade of red which might have been the same price if not more than Will’s own flaunty clothes, and yet Hannibal wore it better and with far more ease than Will could ever dream.

He took the book when Hannibal offered it now, and his throat worked as he tried to come up with what to say. Surely gratitude was not enough—surely there was something more to be said than that? But Will had nothing but the gentle lassitude of sleepiness which still clung to his mind, clogging his head with happy feelings and an elated enjoyment with seeing Hannibal again when he had been so certain that twice was all he would be granted.

Hannibal said nothing more, either. At his side, his fingers dipped back into shadow, and yet the subtle twitch of them was unmistakable to Will’s clever eye.

You’re lonely, came the slow realization. Because Hannibal was not leaving, had returned Will’s book, even, when no one else would have bothered. It was hard to believe how he had

missed it, given the familiarity and intimacy with which Will knew his own loneliness. That part of himself quivered in time with his sluggish thoughts. *Like to like*.

“Thank you,” Will said, “It means... a lot.” He crushed the book to his chest with both arms.

Hannibal cocked his head as if waiting for something. Or scenting something. “Do you have a dog now?”

Will couldn’t help it; he giggled, low beneath his breath, and brushed past Hannibal to walk further out toward the garden fountain. “How do you *do* that? I haven’t named him yet, but I’m thinking of calling him Winston. He’s over this way.”

He didn’t wait to see if Hannibal followed, though he almost second guessed himself when he heard a distinct lack of footsteps out of time with his own. But when Will glanced over his shoulder, he saw Hannibal stood very close again, a breath away from his back. Somehow, Hannibal was able to move with a curiously nonexistent amount of sound. They moved liked this until Will was brushing back the branches of one of the bushes, just far enough to uncover the overturned cardboard box. Winston lay sprawled on his side over the mess of pillowcases, both them and the cardboard damp from the rain and smelling distinctly of wet dog.

Will noticed for the first time that Winston’s breathing was heavy and quick. A mixture of worry and distress fizzed in Will’s head, weighing on him so suddenly he thought he might shake apart, but in reality he did not. He would not tremble like he had in the street. Instead, he crouched in the wet grass and gazed up at Hannibal, a question in his eyes.

“You’re a doctor, aren’t you?” he asked, knowing that his voice was wavering but unafraid of the vulnerability it lent him. Just this once, Will needed this. One lapse did not make a standard. Although it had been many years since Will had trusted an adult, he could trust Hannibal—or at least, he knew that Hannibal would want to help him.

Hannibal’s head, cocked this whole while, tilted back into place. His eyes were darker here, where the opposite wall of the house blocked the moon from view. What little light reached them was diffuse and cast in shades of the deepest grey. He stared at Will’s face and did not once break away to look at Winston. “I am not a veterinarian,” Hannibal said at length. “But I am studying to be a surgeon.”

This was as much a refutation as Hannibal would give him. Will suspected that to do otherwise would be horribly impolite. However, it was not an outright no. This in mind, Will said nothing, only stared straight back.

At last, Hannibal sighed. He whipped off his suit jacket with startling swiftness then flicked the sleeves of his button-up to his elbows. The suit jacket was folded perfectly and neatly before he passed it down for Will to hold.

Hannibal was helpless to stay his own hand, in the end. He spent a long while testing the bone in Winston’s back leg, lifting and adjusting it in turn. Winston made another keening whine high in his throat, but Hannibal appeared very much unfazed, as though he hadn’t heard it at all. The whole time, Will watched, and he considered. Hannibal’s face was

unreadable at the best of times, but now the quality of it was more of a blank confusion. Like there was a disconnect between what Hannibal was seeing and what he was doing, as if he did not have control of his own hands and was struck by fascination with such an alien sensation.

“Will you take him?” Will asked when Hannibal was finished with his assessment, and had both reset the bone in Winston’s leg and wrapped it tightly with one of the pillowcases to staunch the bleeding. “I can’t keep him here,” Will added, not knowing where they stood now and if he was vastly pushing his luck. Such unknown territory felt like wading out into a wide, tumbling stream. “The butler will send him away.”

Hannibal was sweating lightly despite the coolness of the night. Blood from Winston’s fur had transferred to his hands and a few spots higher up his arms. The blank, concentrated expression which he had taken while working on Winston fell away now, replaced instead with another of those familiar, fleeting smiles; like Hannibal had never had much reason to do so before, and couldn’t help it.

“If you’re asking,” was all he said, and leaned in close to Will’s space, so that his smile was all Will saw.

Between them, Winston raised his head tiredly to lick Hannibal’s hand.

Chapter 4

Will dreamt he was wandering a dark woods. As his feet fell into the grooves between exposed roots, they kicked up in their wake fireflies which flickered before fizzling out into the gloom. He didn't recognize his surroundings, nor did he the starved shapes of the trees—snarling, twisted things whose black trunks bled into the starless sky. What he recognized was little more than feeling: a preemptive, nameless fear that tickled soft atop his spine and beneath the curls of hair at his nape.

Though half his mind slept, deep and true, the other remained alert and waiting. The slightest shift in the branches overhead made his skin crawl, while the creak of each root underfoot had him shivering in time with his steps. It was cold. His breath misted the air in front of him, yet he sweated through his t-shirt and thin pajama bottoms. Behind him, the trees rustled and cracked. The quality of it was different, close. A coppery aftertaste slickly painted the back of his throat. Will came to a stop at the base of a warping sycamore. Fireflies scattered under his heels, and around him the trees quieted.

This was how he knew that the monster had followed him.

Will had been walking these woods for some time, forever but not always, eyes closed, his face slack save for their back and forth twitching. Were he to open them in the impenetrable dark, he'd see nothing. Much less a glint of the monster's eyes, for without any to call its own, the monster was effectively a shadow as it stalked after him. What mattered far more was the knowledge it was there. Half awake, Will was slow to breathe and slower still to cower. He did the former now, not the latter, inhaling deeply through his parted lips to rid the taste of blood from his mouth. Rather useless when it hung in the air wherever the monster may be.

It had been weeks since the monster's last visit, and Will was overcome, a moment, with the diluted pull of fear which its presence forced down his stomach. He convulsed against it—rejection, as though the monster was no longer that which he was meant to fear and feared most.

A gust of wind swept past him, chilling the sweat on his skin. The press of it was tender and begging. *See?* it whispered. *See?*

With the languidness of an infant woken from sleep, Will turned on heel and opened his eyes. He stood before the bed of a pickup truck. Its wheels fit in amongst the roots, the lowest branches stark black where they swallowed up the peeling, rust-red paint. Chloris lay atop the truck bed garlanded in a spill of ripe flowers and fat, sweet leaves. Beside her, arms reaching, was the drowned man representative of the god Zephyrus.

Match. Match. Pazzi's voice, heady and observant, was a murmur in Will's ear.

Their expressions were coupled even in death; dark eyes, and the smear of their carefully secretive mouths. Though it was the sunken grey-blue pallor of the man's face which so fixedly held Will's attention. Until, without a tick of movement in his expression nor wide-open eyes, the man rose upright. A puppet with the most compelling strings.

Will's mind turned over the sight, giving no hint of alarm. His eyes fluttered sleepily, and he regarded this version of Zephyrus with serene appraisal.

The moment the skin began to flake and peel from the man's bloated corpse was the very same that the faintest stirring of consciousness snapped back into Will's brain like a rubber band. He blinked rapidly, fighting the sucking pull of his exhaustion. The dead man, meanwhile, turned his head to stare at Will from the truck bed. Where the skin sloughed in long strips, neither blood nor viscera exposed itself in the chilly air. But instead, oil-slick feathers which grew flush with the thick meat of the man's tendons and bones, black as the trees Will wandered in his dreams, and the starless sky he dreaded high above them.

"Will, is that you?" asked the corpse in a voice not his own. Antlers sprouted branch-like from his hair, the deadened bliss deepening upon his face as they lengthened and twisted to form a crown. Feathers sprouted all over the sallow folds of skin just like the wings of Botticelli's Zephyrus, just like the emaciated hide of Will's monster.

"Will."

Will awoke not in the safety of his bed, but in the dimly lit hallway of a hospital. The copper taste of blood clung to the back of his teeth, and swallowing did nothing to alleviate its hot burn.

"Will, is that you?" his dad said from the other side of the doorway.

The sounds of the dark woods had faded, replaced with a steady, slowed beeping. In the doorway, his dad's bed lay half-obscured from view. An older man stood waiting there—one of his dad's buddies from the boatyard who lived alone, and was kind enough to watch after Will for the last long, tireless months. Will could no longer remember the man's name, but he remembered the man's pale blue eyes, compassionate but never pitying, meeting Will's over lukewarm stove-cooked meals in a trailer by the docks, a wide and pockmarked nose wrinkling at the smell of canned corn again that night. He smiled at Will now, gestured Will into the room. *Poor kid,* those pale eyes read*, and so young*.

Walking inside was not so much like reliving a memory as it was like catching himself on the webbing of another dream which was distorting sideways on its axis. The room was small and cold—colder than the woods had been. It did not tilt, though Will listed, unbalanced, and nearly swayed from his feet as he pushed himself closer to the bed. He had no control of his legs as they brought him forward, no matter how hard he strained against them.

His dad was little more than a mound of blankets, facing away toward the covered window on the opposite wall. When Will circled the bed, he found himself looking up at his dad rather than down, for Will was much shorter than he had been moments before in the shadow of the trees and the company of the Botticelli corpses. His hands, too, were softer somehow. Slighter. More skin than bone as his fingers settled on the side of the bed, curling tight in the white sheets.

When his dad lifted his drawn, haggard face to look at him, a thought struck Will—both in his present mind, and that of the past which lived on in the poorly remembered smear of the room's details.

He was seeing his dad for what would be the last time.

Neither Will nor his dad said anything, only pulled together in their shared space. Will attempted to slow his breathing to match the rhythm of the heart monitor, but he found that he could not. They stayed just like that until the time came for Will to go, and his dad shifted his hand to the edge of the bed, unsteady fingers offered up for Will to hold.

That's right, came the detached thought to Will's shuttered mind. He remembered now, his dad holding Will's hand—when shouldn't it have been Will, holding his?

When he finally, truly awoke in his bed in Florence, Will ached for the loss of his dad's touch. It hadn't really been there, after all, and he missed having even the phantom weight of it in his hand. He also found he did not have the weight or warmth of his bedcovers, which lay in a heavy pile on the floor beside the bed—kicked off in the night, the reason for Will having grown chill while he slept. Across the bedroom, one of the balcony doors had been propped open, allowing in the cool flush of the early morning.

The hour was so early, in fact, that none of the maids had yet come to wake Will for breakfast. He became grouchy at the thought, annoyed, too, as he slipped over the side of his bed and gathered the duvet and sheets in his arms to push back on top of the mattress. Though he should have been thankful to the cold for dragging him from his nightmare, he could not help but sulk at getting even less sleep than he was accustomed. Of course. And Will would not be able to fall back asleep, at this point, either.

And that nightmare had been... Will shivered, involuntary as the image of Il Mostro's victims formed behind his eyes, their bodies real and just out reach behind the intricate, hanging frame of the *Primavera*. He shook his head hard to chase it from his mind. Coupled with the still-beating wound of his dad's death, Will's stomach turned over uneasily.

Finally, with an exhausted huff, Will wrapped one of the silk sheets over his shoulders and moved toward the reading futon by the tall windows. As he blinked away the last of the shadows from his eyes, his attention was caught by a dark shape in the corner of his eye. It was a suit jacket, he realized immediately, hanging down over his mirror. Will stepped in close to run his hand down the fabric. The size was far too large to have ever been meant for him. It clicked, then. *Hannibal's* jacket.

The events of the night replayed across the back of Will's mind, edges softened by his own sleepiness. Hannibal had appeared to Will in the garden, had helped Winston when Will asked. The first of these Will puzzled over for several overlong moments. Not so much the why, but the how. *How* was Hannibal here? Will had never mentioned an address. Would never have thought to, either. And he could not accept that Hannibal had followed him here; it was simply impossible, improbable even, given the length of time Will had spent with Pazzi—he or Pazzi would have noticed such a thing.

Which meant...some other option entirely. The uneasiness in Will's stomach hadn't let up, but it felt lighter, somehow. Hannibal had come all this way to return Will's *book*. The thought warmed Will head to toe, and he was grinning, hoping more than anything that Winston was all right. Hannibal had seemed capable enough. More than, really. Winston was in good hands.

Beneath his fingertips, the jacket was even softer than Will's sheets. An exceedingly luxurious material and thread count, what had appeared black from afar but was actually of the deepest maroon. It held a shimmery, feather-like sheen in the dips of light from the bedroom windows. In the interplay of shadow and grey half-light, the fabric was more of a russet purple, almost like a strangely attractive bruise. Hannibal had removed it to see to Winston, but the more important question was why Hannibal would have left it behind. As tired as Will had been, he had not questioned any of what had transpired. He had only wanted what was best for Winston.

Perhaps, in the flurry of activity, Hannibal had simply forgotten? Though much of his memory of the night evaded Will, he could not accept that it was intentional.

The Garden Wall rested on a corner of the dresser beside the mirror, and the jacket draped from one of the mirror's elegantly curved edges. Where Will stood before the glass, the jacket blocked half of his face from view. Idly, he found himself comparing the dark coloring to Pazzi's tie from the day before. The silvery pattern of the tie had held a certain luminary impermanence, reminding Will briefly of the fireflies he'd dreamed of during the night, while Hannibal's suit jacket reminded him of something archaic and seductive. Not quite the color of a bruise, nor of blood. Something decidedly other.

Will leant forward and raised the sleeve of the jacket to his mouth. He breathed out against the fabric before pressing his face to it, from his chin to the tip of his nose, and inhaled deeply. The scent was warmth and burning, faint lavender, and garnered the barest hint of recollection—the forested land behind Will's home in New Orleans, browning pine needles and the sap that stuck in the cracks of his old sneakers.

Whatever anxiety lingered in Will's head from his nightmare left him in a rush then, the ache in his chest along with it, tingling down his arms and the back of his neck before tapering off into nothing. For a long while before the maids arrived to retrieve him, Will stood in half view of the mirror, and was able to purge the image of Il Mostro's art from his waking mind.

The scent of Hannibal's suit jacket filled his nose again, and all he felt was safe.

Will's peace of mind lasted for all of an hour.

Breakfast was a spread of pancakes in perfectly round sizes, topped with blackberries and the brightest array of syrupy strawberry slices. Signor Doemling had not named them as such, and instead rattled off something in sonorous French before setting the morning paper on the grand table, another set of cloth napkins atop it, and exiting the parlor.

Will's stomach had grumbled at the sight, and he was abruptly reminded of how little he had eaten in the last two days. This was how he nearly forgot about the newspaper altogether. Ten minutes later, his gaze alighted on it, and he reached for it with sticky fingers. The napkins slid off the front page.

IL MOSTRO CACCIA AL CREPUSCOLO.

Thick blocks of capitalized letters ran across the headline. *The Monster Hunts at Dusk*.

Unease bloomed once more in Will's lower stomach, less focused than earlier, and upset the food there. A brief wave of sickness followed after, so strong he thought he might vomit over the table; that would have far worse consequences, and so Will forced it down while unshed tears gathered hot in the corners of his eyes.

He had been curious, before. Now he felt compelled to look. Despite the warnings. Despite Pazzi, and the nightmare. There was nothing that could keep him from seeing. Will's eyes scanned the front page quickly. This time, there was no picture.

Paola and Antonella Migliorini, two sisters aged twenty-two and twenty-four, respectively, were discovered not long after midnight. They are believed to have been stopped by Il Mostro while in Antonella's car, under unknown circumstances which caused them to park along a country road in Montespertoli. Early reconstruction of the events suggests that, after coercing the couple out of their vehicle, Il Mostro led them out to a woodland area nearby.

Paola's cause of death was uncertain. Antonella's wounds suggested strangling. However, the younger was missing her heart, while the elder—her tongue. *Strangled*, Will thought, trembling with the knowledge, *subsequent to ripping out her tongue while she still breathed.*

The two sisters were nicknamed *Vinavil* by friends and family after a brand of superglue. They were inseparable. Yet, most sickening of all was that the corpse of Paola's infant daughter was found posed between the sisters. The infant had been reported stolen from her car-seat approximately two weeks before. Paola and her husband, newly married a year and a half previous, were distraught.

Evidence taken from Antonella's home led police to believe she had suffocated the child and kept it hidden in an industrial freezer. The rate of decay suggested this as well.

Will had to physically press down on his stomach with one hand to keep the surge of vomit at bay. His thoughts grounded to a halt at that single word. Infant. Fingers quivering on the edge of the paper, Will numbly flipped to the next page. He was not disappointed. There was a picture after all—almost a full two page spread, grainy and blurred in the more prurient locations on the bodies, but real nevertheless.

The two women were posed using cuts of tree branches impaled through their hands and abdomens, one body on either end of some sort of stone structure. A *well*, Will realized. Long abandoned, and empty of its water, but a stone well, regardless. It must have been located in the woodland area mentioned in the article, because weeds and undergrowth grew around the decrepit, crumbling base, and patches of dirtied moss stretched across the stone segments. The woman on the right—*Paola Migliorini*, Will identified instantly—was dressed in a sheer, flowing gown, her eyes staring almost coldly off camera and to the right, mouth flat and expression distant. One arm rested across her lap, under which lay a sprig of leaves and a white rose. Her left arm covered the lid of a closed pot.

On the right side, opposite Paola, Antonella had been more brusquely oriented upon the stone. She was left almost entirely nude, and balanced precariously on her right arm while her left raised aloft what looked to be an oil lamp. Branches, staked through both elbow and wrist, kept the arm in position—her blood had run down the bark, and crusted there hours after her death. Beneath her, a dark billowing sheet which fell in large folds to the ground, while a twist of narrow fabric fell across her lap. Her head was turned to regard Paola, eyes lowered, almost beseeching.

When Will's eyes roamed around the photograph, he was most drawn to the body at the center. That was Paola's infant daughter, two weeks dead and retrieved from a freezer by Il Mostro—but *why?* Was this how the Monster of Florence chose the sisters? Paola's daughter played a central role in Il Mostro's recreation; there had to be something more. The infant was leant over the well, one arm reaching forward into its empty center. It had been posed facing downward, as if playful, grasping outward to play in a murky pool that only it could see. Unlike the women though, it was far more preserved. If not for its limbs, swollen fatly in death, the reproduction of the tableau here in black and white made the infant almost appear alive.

"How do I know you?" Will whispered beneath his breath, eyes returning to the younger sister clothed in the flowing dress. He did not know that he had spoken aloud, and yet he leant closer, eyes shuttering as he looked, and saw, impressions swirling deep in the dark recess of his mind. "You," he said lowly, staring at her. His voice grew thick now, as if he were entranced by her detached yet ostentatious image. "You had so much love in your heart, why give it to another?"

Will returned to himself suddenly, and to Antonella's semi-nude display he remarked, curious, "Is that how you really felt?"

Did you love your sister? Or did you love her more than sisters should?

Will settled back in his chair. The light from the parlor windows was brighter here than in his bedroom, where gold threads of sunshine could cast solid lines across the finely patterned table cloth. Will blinked at them several times to clear his head of Antonella's.

He closed his eyes. The pendulum began to swing.

A gentle knock came from the direction of the parlor doors. "Monsieur, pardon the interruption, but are you finished with your meal?"

A maid moved into the room, curtsying only briefly before she folded her hands across her apron. She was young, no older than Hannibal if not several years his junior, and her hair was a long and snowy shade of blond. She hated sudden, loud noises, but was chiefly assigned to kitchen duties. Will had seen her many times through the kitchen doorway, when she had first started there and still jumped at the slightest clatter of spoons in metal bowls and dishware tossed into the sinks. Will read *abuse* in her hard swallows, *woman* in the deep, bending curtsies she offered in Madame La Falce's presence. Her mother, then, and a slowly drawn impression in Will's mind of her as a cowering child in her own tiny kitchen.

Will said nothing to the maid, only looked on, mouth inflectionless as he stared at her dolefully. She simpered and curled her fingers almost unnoticeably in her apron. Will, however, always noticed.

“I would not usually interrupt early,” she said, the pitch of her accent honeyed as her lips pulled into a soft, hesitant smile. “But Bernard will be arriving rather so, today. You understand.”

He nodded and began to stand up to leave, before thinking better of it and flipping the newspaper closed. Then he folded it a number of times, the better to conceal the headline and the intricate details of Il Mostro’s display. It would not do for the maid to see him reading the article. Signor Doemling had not been paying attention when he set out the paper, but the maid had kinder eyes and a desperate shyness about her movements. She would grow concerned, and concern was not what Will wanted.

When he was back in his room, Will headed toward his dresser without another thought. He had already torn the large photo of the two sisters from the paper, and deposited the remains of it in the hallway on his walk up. His hands reached, rote now, for *The Garden Wall* with the intent to stow the folded clipping inside the heavy pages. But before they could land on the brass covering, his hand froze above the binding.

A connection had sprung to life in Will’s head. Like to like, or rather, the curiosity of coincidence. Will cocked his head as the idea slowly formed—he wanted to understand, but more than that, he was certain that he already did. Il Mostro’s choosing of the sisters, that was. And the thought was as enticing as it was terrifying.

Bernard would not be arriving for another twenty minutes, more than enough time, Will knew, to pursue his current line of thinking while it still burned bright and consuming at the back of his mind.

He grabbed *The Garden Wall* from the dresser and sat down in the cushion of the plush futon; a fire had been lit in the fireplace at his back, the doing of a maid, and it would eventually come to warm him. There were multiple chapters to the story, but each stood on its own much like an anthology of one interwoven theme. Will flipped through the pages until he landed on the last in the book—the shortest, but also the one he had made his dad reread to him the most frequently, until Will had learned to read on his own and wore the paper thin with clumsy hands.

The story went like this. A family lived alone in a cottage on the edge of a town, and their garden grew alongside a thick forest. To prevent animals from eating the family’s food and meager harvest, the father built a tall wall of stones to keep them out and the garden inside. For many years they lived there happily, and the family’s two daughters would play in the garden, but never the forest.

Then an illness swept through the town, and the father and mother grew swiftly sick. The local doctors did all they could, but eventually, both parents passed in the brutal cold of a winter morning, only a handful of hours between their respective deaths. It was a time of sorrow for the sisters, whose parents were all they had, but that was quickly overshadowed when they, too, fell ill.

While the doctors watched over them, and they grew increasingly weak from sickness, the two sisters began having dreams where they could play in the garden together once more, free of the pain of their waking bodies. They shared these dreams, always meeting at the same moment after they had fallen asleep, though they never questioned the oddness of such a thing, or told the doctors of their gift. It was simply a thing that was.

Over time, their visits to the garden in their dreams grew more frequent—their sleeps longer as days went by, and their illness did not fade or recede. Until one night, they dreamed they were playing together in the garden, and heard a quiet, hoarse voice ask from the other side of the garden wall, “May I enter your garden?”

The elder sister was disquieted and uncertain. She knew never to trust strangers, but she was also old enough to know that the wall was built for a reason, and that was to keep the forest out. So she said, loud enough to carry over the stones, “No.”

However, the voice returned every night from then on. Always so quiet, so patient as it inquired after entering the garden. When finally the younger sister, heavied with guilt, stood and answered, “Yes, you may enter.”

Both sisters knew this was a mistake when the thing that sat on the other side of the wall had stolen its way over. They found that they could never fully look at it, whatever it may be, for their gazes would always shift and slide away, like water over the fine feathers of a duck’s back. They never saw the monster’s face, but they could hear it; slow, scraping movements in the darkness and the rustling of leaves, though there were neither trees nor bushes on the inside of the garden to make such a sound.

“May I have a drink of water?” the monster asked next, until again the younger sister relented, and pointed it to a small pond in the garden. The elder sister grew uneasy, more certain of her own wariness, and held the younger sister close. The garden was always dark when they entered these dreams, and all they had to see by was the yellow glow of an oil lamp. The elder sister tried, in vain, to catch sight of the monster with the lamp. But again, even stood still as it drank, she saw nothing but darkness.

They sat together, fear on the edge of their minds, until finally the monster moved across the garden to the garden wall. There it stopped, and asked in that quiet voice, “May I take you home with me?”

The elder sister shouted an angry, “No!” And the monster was gone again.

They thought that this meant the monster was gone for good. They were wrong. It returned the next night, and the next, every night and every time it was turned away angrily by the elder sister, who clutched the younger close and shook. They woke to pain, and increasing fever, but they were far more fearful of what came for them when they fell asleep.

Eventually, one night the younger sister moved toward the garden wall and sat, waiting. She ignored the elder sister’s pleas, and when the monster asked, she granted. The monster stole into the garden a second time, circling while the sisters bickered. The younger was brave, and thought it needed help. The elder was afraid for her sister’s life. In the end, that was what settled things—there was too little risk, given their ailing health, for the younger sister to

reason against it. So when the monster asked again for water, she granted it drink, and when the monster asked again for her to come home with it, she relented.

The elder sister gaped and screamed the younger sister's name, until at once, leaves rustled and her sister had vanished between one flicker of lamplight and the next.

In the morning, the elder sister woke but the younger sister did not. She had died in her sleep.

The elder sister cried through her worsening fever for many days after, sleeping too fitfully at night to dream of the garden. Then one day, after many more restless nights in bed, she slipped back inside. The garden was quiet, and dark. But too quiet and too dark without the younger sister there. She felt alone, and betrayed, but also sad. She missed her parents, but more than anything, she would never stop missing her sister.

Hours passed, and the elder sister thought that the monster might never return. But then she heard it; the quiet, labored voice, inquiring, "May I enter your garden?" She granted its request, and then the next, until it had finished drinking deeply from the pool and rustled in place. Lip trembling, the elder sister swung the lamp around on its handle, as if she might punch the air, and the monster too. For it had returned, and the younger sister had not. The light bounced in wild slashes, until for the briefest of seconds, she saw the monster. Its body was overlarge and cumbersome, and it loped on all four of its legs instead of two. Its body had no skin or true shape, only rotting and putrid tree trunks which curled inward and twisted round one another, gaping holes like open mouths and empty eye sockets littering the trunks and branches—the faces of souls frozen in mourning.

The elder sister trembled. She thought that the younger sister must be trapped there, after the monster ate her, too. But she cared so deeply for the younger sister, and wanted so much to never be without her, that she would do anything to be with her again. So when the monster moved once more toward the garden wall, and quietly asked, "May I take you home with me?" She agreed without hesitation.

She found she was on the other side of the garden wall now, and the monster appeared before her. The trunks pulled apart from each other, snapping and contorting as they fell away to the ground. Until finally, the monster was truly gone, and in its place the tree trunks had become the familiar figures of her family. Her mother, her father, her younger sister. They had come to take her away with them, so that she may pass painlessly in her sleep and carry over into purgatory.

The loyalty of the elder sister to the younger sister was what stuck most in Will's memory over the years since he first read the tale. Though now he could only think of Antonella and Paola Migliorini. It occurred to him that he was seeing a negative—the sisters in the book a stark comparison in opposites next to the sisters in Il Mostro's masterpiece. Where one set cared deeply and loyally, selfless, the other was warped and discolored with jealousy. For within a room in Will's mind separate from that which held the *Primavera*, he saw the sisters impaled on their branches atop the watering well, and the painting they created sharpened and defined itself.

Antonella had grown angry and jealous of Paola's husband and child. "Selfish," Will whispered aloud, voice scratchy from the drag of Antonella's cries in the back of his throat,

the scream she'd pitched upward as she felt her tongue being forcefully ripped from her mouth. He husked, "But you never said anything, did you? And that was rather rude."

He put the newest tableau out of his mind when Bernard entered the drawing room beside the bedroom, and called Will inside. Bernard was in a good mood for so early, talking animatedly and gesturing with his long-fingered hands. He was an older man—the dirty blond of his long hair was struck through with striations of grey and white, and the round spectacles perched upon Bernard's nose had become necessary in his growing age. Bernard directed Will to sit at the long table, chattering still about this or that—the tomato garden he tended to on his home's small terrace, the kittens his wife had rescued and required special milk from a bottle.

As he spoke, Bernard began setting out fake fruit from a canvas bag, which he arranged both in and around a glass bowl. Will had to sigh at this, already preparing to strengthen his resolve as a clean sheet of sketch paper was laid out before him to start his next still-life. The last few had not gone so terribly, or so Bernard had proclaimed; in fact, Will had apparently shown improvement. However, it was much too hard to focus. Bernard's one-sided conversation was harmless—that, Will was not bothered by. What bothered him was the photograph of the two sisters from the paper, flickering in and out behind his eyelids as he slowly closed and opened them, stare intent on the bowl of fruit.

For once it was not the Botticelli murders which plagued him. Antonella's prayerful, pleading face bloomed from the dark, instead. She sought forgiveness, and Will found he ached to give it to her—impossible, but still he *wanted.*

Will did not realize his eyes had closed, and remained so for a very long time. The drawing room had fallen silent, Bernard's chattering quieted into nothing. He opened his eyes.

The scene Il Mostro had left, almost sweetly gift-wrapped, in the woods of Montespertoli gazed back up at Will from his sketch paper. Will had... drawn it. The shrouded figures of the sisters, the playing infant, the well where all three perched. Not artistically accurate, of course, but doubtless it was them.

"Ah," Bernard said suddenly, from where he leant a breath away from Will's shoulder, looking down at the drawing as well. Will felt his heart lurch inside his chest, and he would have jumped had it not been for Bernard's hand on his arm. "Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*. I was not aware you knew this one."

Warmth rushed to fill out Will's cheeks. He coughed.

Bernard patted his arm sympathetically. "Not quite our usual still-life of fruit, but I will take it."

Then realization hit Will, and his insides lit up as though connected to an electrical wire. "Titian," Will repeated, and the name was both ash and salt on his tongue. He affected nonchalance. "I honestly could not remember the title."

For a moment, Bernard merely examined the drawing. "Has Madame informed you of the gala commencing tonight in honor of the University's recent art installation? I am not one for

ballrooms, but surely you might be keen to attend. I hear they will be previewing a selection from all over Italy for the duration, with a few pieces borrowed from the Uffizi, as well."

Will shook his head. He did not quite follow Bernard's line of thinking, however he would not complain. It gave him a chance to temper the embarrassment which still burned bright and hot on his face and neck. Sometimes, he despised his own mind and the burden it often became.

"Shall I let her know that you are interested in joining her?" Bernard continued, patting Will's arm a final time before withdrawing. The old man's tone became subtly teasing, "Perhaps I could even convince her it is an assignment. Go out and see some art, then return to tell me all about it. I could have you pick one you like for an essay on visual analysis. A benefit to your learning of color theory. Hmm?"

Will was far more pre-occupied with having learned the painting which Il Mostro had chosen. *Sacred and Profane Love*. It was comical, in a way. But also deeply disquieting. Will should not have been made even more curious by this knowledge, yet he found he wanted to see the original painting very much.

Beneath the table, Will's fingers twitched against his thighs. He should call Inspector Pazzi. He had the man's number, hidden away in *The Garden Wall* on the little slip of paper.

Or should he not say anything at all?

So absent-minded, he tilted his head in Bernard's direction and hummed what might have been an affirmation. For Bernard took it as one, patting Will's shoulder before announcing gravely, "Then I shall inform Madame at once."

As his hands moved to lift his drawing from the table, Will was lost in his consideration of it, and more of the same half-images whose presence he'd grown so used to behind his eyes. He recalled the devoted skill in the curves of Hannibal's renderings of the *Primavera,* and did not notice the motions of Bernard's departure until the door had clicked behind him.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The social worker who drove Will to the airport had been kind. Too kind, the type most prone to pouring over into platitudes. Will could never be quite sure when he resurfaced from the muddled depths of his mind, so soon was it after his dad's death, but it might have been in the shadow of the leaning pillars which marked the lines at the security gate, their misshapen shapes reforming across his meager luggage and the burgundy coloring of the carpet. Or even later, when the social worker passed him off to an airline hostess, and she frowned at him where he'd been sat on the floor at her feet while the other passengers boarded around them, and then frowned at his deflated suitcase—*why do I always get the troubled kids.*

For Will, the weeks following the funeral were a haze, their hollow outlines haunting him where the substance of them couldn't. Even the news that his mother, long lost and far run, wanted him back was not enough to move him. Though Will could hardly recall the phrasing, or the tone the social worker had taken when she'd told him, he remembered the exact intonation with which she had referred to his mother's attention as charity. What she had meant, regarding his mother's sudden and apparent interest in him, was narcissism.

As a maid dressed Will that evening in preparation for the gala, the word came slow to his mind under the strain of his weariness. His clothes were to be perfect tonight, the best to reflect the La Falce name. And yet, Will was tired. At having to always be dressed by another, never to dress himself, and being made to feel like a doll of the cruelest porcelain. For even as the thought danced around his head, the maid was grabbing at him, pulling and twisting as though it hardly mattered. It didn't. Not really. But to Will, it meant ceding more to his dependence on others.

When the maid moved to replace his shirt with one of a finer tailoring, Will had to carefully turn his bruised arm away and hide it from view. A day and a half later, the darkening shades spreading outward from the broken vessels were stunning and dangerous. Blackened at their center and purpling deeply at their edges, where Monsieur Lefebvre's nails had almost, but not quite, breached the skin.

The bruise had grown to become a near-living thing, rippling and tingling whenever Will so much as shifted his arm. Worse, when the silk of the shirt sleeves was pulled down over his arms, and Will could feel his heartbeat thrumming from the spot where the fabric pressed softly downward against his skin. The pain was not unbearable, but stood as a reminder of where Will was in those moments when his mind began to slip—readied by the maid's deft hands in his bedroom, or awaiting his mother's descent to the foyer while their chauffeured car idled on the avenue. Will had clutched at the bruise then, through his sleeve, and avoided the probing glance Signor Doemling sent his way.

In truth, his mother had not needed much convincing to allow Will to attend alongside her. When he had first arrived at her home in Paris two years ago, Alessandra La Falce had cooed and doted over him like any new mother might, and attempted to coerce him into attending

many such events in the proceeding weeks. He knew even then that she was not a suitable replacement for his dad, and even moreso, he knew her attention would not last. Will didn't need to meet her eyes to know this—it was evident enough in her abandonment of Will from birth, and the very fact she had no recollection of *The Garden Wall* when he procured it from his suitcase.

Did it ever belong to you? Will had thought, jetlagged and rankled by the sight of the rich life his mother had always led, all the years gone by. *Or was it a lie told to soften the truth of you?*

The gala was being held in a grand ballroom on the university's campus. A building of smooth slated arches and marble balconies, pockets of lush garden growing in and around its entrances. The longer areas entered into wide halls and higher ceilings, where most of the art would be on display for the evening. Though Will and Alessandra arrived early, music and laughter could be heard from the street, along with passing attendees dressed to the nines in tuxedos and fashionably-cut dresses.

Will practiced flattening his mouth in the reflection of the car window during the ride over, just the slightest uplift in the corners to suggest a muted smile. Something that would appease his mother, and whomever may speak with her, without suggesting the barest hint of his true irritation. Neither could his growing despondency show itself, even as it stirred to life in his gut at the sound of so many voices.

Tonight Will would be the quiet but well-mannered son, and his mother would not find reason to believe his behavior distasteful.

She had only wanted Will after seeing a picture of him, after all. Will had Alessandra's dark tangle of curls—trimmed now, to a length suiting a proper boy of twelve—and they shared the same wide line of their jaws. How could she not want him? All she had needed was to see him, and she was made to want something created in her image.

The lights which carried out onto the curving drive were blinding, the commotion of the hired staff noisy as they fluttered out to the arriving cars. They helped the attendees from their seats and offered to drive their cars for parking further down the street. Alessandra emerged without assistance, and her white gown swirled at her heels. Ethereal, as ever. Truly, she was not an insipid woman, or one prone to cruelty. However, she had something akin to the sight Will's empathy lent him in dissecting the motives of others. A certain cunning observation and intelligence, and much like Will, a tendency for acidic sarcasm.

When they moved through the pillared entrance, Will walking slightly behind her, Alessandra looked the part of a rich business owner, high-profile donor to the university that she was. Though that business was clothing rather than artwork, the two mixed well among the high class.

Gazes flickered Madame La Falce's way as if drawn there by some unforgiving pull, and Will had to force his body from shifting a step inward and behind her. He swallowed instead, discomforted, and refused to tug at the bow-tie which hugged far too snug beneath his collar.

Alessandra held her chin high through the attention, and dipped back to run a hand through the curls at Will's nape. A touch that he hardly registered before it was gone again, and yet Will's toes curled against the violent urge to shudder. After so many of Will's refusals, his mother had stopped hoping he would attend one of her functions or soirees. To have Will do so now must have been, in some way, gratifying. Not that Alessandra would ever say as much; for now, her blue eyes were lidded with her pleasure, her soft features fixed in relaxed poise.

The music playing in the ballroom was not too fast to be tiring, rather, it was slow and dreamy enough to capture Will's attention. Classical, with violins and the soothing clarity of a piano carrying throughout the room. As his mother mingled with a small group of well-suited men and women in cocktail dresses, Will kept to himself in a small space all his own—blocked in on all sides by bodies, and with only a view of their backs. Then finally, he allowed his mind to wander.

His dad had taught him breathing exercises, once, to combat the anxiety he sometimes suffered in loud crowds. The crowds of the Palazzo and Florence's narrow streets were not so disagreeable, not when Will felt he could disappear in them, and be ignored if he did not dare meet the eyes of those who passed him by. Here, he was expected to converse politely and within the bounds dictated by his class. His mother's class, which would have Will simpering over the catering and offering bite-size praise for the taste of the décor.

There were tables spread out around the room, each decorated with black roses in off-white vases, golden ribbons twined about the stems and ending in curled flourishes where stem kissed fattened petal. Atop the tables, platters of succulent fruit powdered in flakes the same lustering gold—pears, pomegranates, and apples as red as the evocative slice of his mother's lipstick. All called the eye to where they had been spread out over the artful folds of the dessert tables, and dipped in sinful dollops of chocolate.

The largest of these tables lay beneath an oil painting of a strawberry field, one half of the sky overcast while the other depicted a shallow promise of sunlight. This was where most of the roses had been placed, a wild frame for a single captivating centerpiece—the snow-white skull of a stag. More of the black petals had been strewn over the cranium, and down the length of its snout to where the incisive bone ended, sharp, over the jut of its slanted teeth.

This time, Will's shudder was born of exhilaration, the nerves at the back of his own skull popping between his quickened breaths. *The décor*, Will would have offered if asked, *was beautiful.* A mixture of death and life, and a credit to the artist responsible for their partnership.

Unknowingly, Will had left the sea of bodies and walked closer to the center table; for now he could have reached out with little effort and laid his fingers on the skull's slender nose. Its antlers remained remarkably intact, and created what Will imagined was a perfect half-moon to encircle the strawberry field.

Much slower, impressions of Will's nightmare from the morning filtered into his thoughts. The roses were beautiful, of course, but not a match for the beauty of the Botticelli, and that of sweet Chloris and her sweeter, flowered leaves. Like the skull's antlers, the pickup truck had served as Il Mostro's ungroomed and untampered framing. There was a unanimous sense

of emotion to them both, elegant and almost preening beneath their own artistry, as though they had been crafted by like-minded hands.

Will thought this curious. He pressed one hand to his bruised arm to better feel the thrum of his heart, and assure himself that no—that couldn't be right. No one could understand Il Mostro like Will did.

The music had faded in Will's mindscape, lost as he was becoming in its many open rooms. There, he could walk past the room which housed the *Primavera*—Il Mostro's recreation having taken the place of the original, in Will's mind—and on to the door which led into the blurred woodland of Il Mostro's second masterpiece. The sister murders, *Sacred and Profane Love*.

It had occurred to Will at multiple points throughout the afternoon and evening that he should be giving this information over to Inspector Pazzi. For as far as he knew, no news outlet had yet to proclaim the correct identification of the most recent murders as Titian's work. Neither would Pazzi, unless the man was in Rome, where the painting—that of *Sacred and Profane Love*—currently resided.

Still, the exhilaration Will felt had petered out, and was soon replaced with doubt. Will doubted himself and his attachment to the murders. This pervasive need of his to solve the riddle of them, and for him alone to be doing the solving. However, he also doubted that what he was doing was right. He needed to turn this new information over to Pazzi; or did he want for Il Mostro to kill again and again, without chance of capture?

The slip of paper with Pazzi's hastily scrawled phone number rested in the inner pocket of Will's pants. He had placed it there after the maid finished dressing him, and there it had remained ever since. He considered, again, finding a phone—but the still-image of Paola and Antonella, mutilated in the woods, kept him in place, woefully transfixed.

With a small shake of his head, Will dispelled the memory of the photograph and closed the door of that particular room behind him. He needed to be present in the ballroom, and there were hours yet to convince himself. Surely the weight of the paper in his pocket would grow unbearable before long.

With finality, Will steadied his breathing and turned away from the stag skull. His hand had moved to his pocket, then slid inside to touch two fingers to the slip of paper. As he did this, he scanned the crowd for his mother. If she hadn't already, no doubt she would eventually notice his glaring absence from her side.

However, barely a moment passed when Will's gaze caught on something far different, and there he had to stop. He knew his eyes had widened, though he had no way of controlling his shocked surprise. For across the ballroom and the space between, beyond the heads of the circling couples moving together in seamless waltz, was Hannibal.

Though Will had never thought of Hannibal as old, he certainly appeared years younger among the crowd which gathered about him now. He stood facing away from Will, at an angle that bore nothing of his face but the curve of a cheekbone, jaw angled slightly as Hannibal listened to a selection of older men stood near him, all of whom drank delicately

from flutes of champagne. As could only be expected, Hannibal sported a suit of a finer make than any other man or woman in attendance. An alternation of black and white in vertical cuts which followed the curvature of the stitching, too wide to be pinstripes and more tasteful for the distinction.

Then Hannibal's head flicked to the side, and his profile was made visible despite the distance and the movements of the dancers. It was a moment of distortion; a twinning event, wherein for several seconds suspended in time, the recollected vision of Hannibal carrying Winston away, arms blood-stained and full with the dog's limp and muddied body, broke apart the lines of Hannibal's extravagant suit. One image replaced with another, blurring together, before the moment came to an end and was gone again.

Will had to swallow past the lump lodged in his throat. That had happened sometime during the darkest hours of the night, though it felt like much more time had passed since then; weeks if not months, though it had hardly been an entire day. Will had stood in the copse of bushes by the garden fountain and watched as Hannibal hefted Winston into his deceptively strong arms. There Winston had whined, low, and licked at Will's fingers when he reached up over Hannibal to pat the fur between Winston's wilted ears. Then Will had been unable to do anything but whisper a quiet *thank you*, and again he watched as Hannibal took Winston away, selfishly clutching both his book and Hannibal's jacket to his chest.

For a long moment, Will did not know how to react. Could he get Hannibal's attention, somehow? Should he, or did he never really have that right? Clearly, Hannibal was preoccupied with conversation, though it was impossible to know what was being talked about from across the ballroom. However, Will could not help but notice the stringent way in which Hannibal held himself. A callback to the first time they had met before the *Primavera* —a man with far more control of himself than the dithering professors and donors gathered here could ever hope to attain. Stood among the crowd, Hannibal appeared out of place in Will's approximation; not quite physically, as the careful construction of Hannibal's demeanor and easy superiority—so, *so* easy, for he wore his outer suit well—exceeded that of everyone else in the room.

Yet, Hannibal was separate from them due to his youthful appearance. Those to which he spoke to clearly noticed, for they smiled more loosely at Hannibal's words, and tittered often beneath sips of champagne. Not quite out of place here, but kin to Will all the same.

Their cool laughter, for one, seemed to irk Hannibal more than it did Will. A small twitching at the hinge of Hannibal's jaw, as he swallowed back on his clever tongue. To do otherwise would be a flagrant imitation of rudeness.

Idly, Will dragged his fingers once more over the slip of paper nestled in his pocket. He wondered if doing so enough times would allow him to read the number off by memory of touch alone, as if Pazzi had written it in braille or raised ink.

Hannibal never turned in Will's direction, and he never got the chance to see if Hannibal eventually noticed him through the dancers; minutes later, Alessandra was pushing through the crowd toward Will. She did not look angry, merely flushed from the heat of the room and with an expression of serene enjoyment filling out her pronounced cheeks.

“Will, darling,” she said lowly, slow as the words husked from her throat. It was an attractive sound, as was the rest of her, where her hair fell over the curl of her shoulder. “I was worried you had run off.” Here her head dipped forward, and she stepped in close to run a thumb down the side of Will’s face. “You are so handsome,” she murmured. “And even with your father’s eyes...”

Will held her gaze, and didn’t so much as breathe.

Then Alessandra’s hand fell away, a slight pinching of his skin in parting, and she sighed, put-upon. “You really shouldn’t waste it in that room of yours all day. Isn’t this nice? And what lovely artwork for you to see.”

He threw a quick glance beside him, to the stag skull sat prominently on the table and wreathed in roses. “Yes,” was all Will said.

“Don’t be like that, darling,” Alessandra continued, a glossy smile spreading her lips, and meant to encourage an answering one from Will. When he refused, and a minute passed in which he only stared blankly up at her, not quite meeting her eyes but studying the bags hidden beneath her foundation, she sighed again.

Her lips parted to say more, but then a throat cleared politely behind her. His mother stood aside, and both she and Will turned to see who had interrupted them.

“*E sì come la mente mi ridice*,” intoned Hannibal, where he imposed more than was proper into the space separating him from Alessandra. Enraptured as she was by the passionate cadence of his words, she would not have noticed the intimacy of their proximity. “*Amor mi disse: ‘Quell'è Primavera, e quell'ha nome Amor, sì mi somiglia*.’”

Will’s heart gave a great thump against his ribs, and he swallowed, so loud that he was thankful for the music which drowned out the sound. The slight uptick in the corner of Hannibal’s mouth was nearly a smirk—but to Alessandra, who was rather affected, it was alluring. A sly look flitted about Hannibal’s eyes, all too fetching and becoming on his handsomely carved face. This Hannibal directed at Will, there and then gone, before he returned his steady regard to Alessandra.

Impossibly, Alessandra flushed even deeper. Will did not fault her the embarrassment; the lure of Hannibal’s flawless Italian was something enviable, and strangely, a small prick of what might have been jealousy wedged itself into the back of Will’s mind, and stayed there. Of what, he was uncertain. Though Will was taken in once more by Hannibal’s richly fitted suit—something vogue with sharp charcoal lapels, a flawless bowtie knotted at the collar, and upon closer inspection, an alternation of three colors rather than two. The third was the thinnest line of red threaded between each stripe, and which brought immediate attention to the matching color in Hannibal’s eyes.

The youth Will had seen in Hannibal earlier was thoroughly embellished by his clean-shaven jaw. It was a disarming guise meant to reel people in rather than spurn them away. Or so Will surmised in the few seconds he had to observe Hannibal, before Alessandra regained the ability to speak.

“Lovely,” she said dreamily, long lashes falling down over her reddened cheeks, full and dark. Her smile was the truest she had given anyone all night. “Dante, correct?”

“A beautiful woman of fine tastes,” Hannibal replied, and the tick in his lips softened and dipped with his lowering tone. “Forgive me my interruption, Signora, but might I persuade you into joining me for this dance?”

The song playing in the ballroom was nearing its end, soon to be replaced by another. As the last notes swelled, Hannibal offered up a hand to Alessandra and inclined over it. “May I?” he asked, so very polite.

He did not seek out Will’s face a second time, and Will, unable to speak, was left to do nothing but watch as Hannibal led his mother toward the center of the floor. The next song began, and Hannibal straightened before her, one hand raised to hold one of hers while his other hand slotted into the curved hip of her gown. As Will watched them, he did not understand what he felt—a sinking pressure in his chest and under his heart, not unlike the aches to which he was accustomed. For in the unforgiving brightness of the chandeliers, the black of Hannibal’s suit liquefied and reformed in scattered turns, while Alessandra was marked by flowing, resplendent white.

That white filled Will’s mind, and in the absence of any other color, he heard a memory of Bernard’s attentive instruction. *The nymph Chloris, clothed in white*, he had told Will, long before Will saw the Uffizi, or the room with the *Primavera*. Though here Alessandra had taken the place of Chloris, and as for Hannibal—*she is seized by the winged Zephyrus, kidnapped and possessed, before they marry and she is transformed into a deity. She becomes the goddess of Spring and the eternal bearer of life.*

Will’s stomach turned. He would not allow himself to think of the Botticelli as he watched them circle and sync together. He would *not*. His mouth tasted like rust; the weathering of the pickup truck and the sweetened sap of fresh leaves.

As Hannibal turned Alessandra round, and round again, his face was not unreadable. But a fixed emptiness, compelled to reveal only a hint of performative enjoyment in those shared heartbeats where Alessandra turned her face back to his. Will did not know how he knew this, but so closely was he studying Hannibal, it was simply a crack which became easily apparent. Or at least, to Will it was. Considering the usual mask which Hannibal held in place there, Will could not help but think it purposefully left open. For Will saw only the sort of calculated emotional involvement designed to keep Alessandra entwined in Hannibal's dance, and nothing more.

He was imagining it, had to be, when Hannibal’s eyes flashed his way and that same slyness formed there just as it had before.

The discomfort in Will’s stomach tightened further, and he had no choice but to look away. Anywhere was better, though in the end his attention was diverted to the dessert table and the luxuriating display of the food. With his back to the dancers, the moving duet of Chloris and Zephyrus fled from his mind. Darkness lingered at the edge of Will’s vision in their wake, and he bypassed the apples and pomegranates for the safety of the pear slices. A plate of small, cubed meat sat beside it, and Will’s stomach grumbled knowingly.

Will took several slow, savoring bites of both while he conjured Winston in a new room of his mind, sitting in the unkempt grass outside his dad's old house. *Their* old house, where Winston could snuffle at the wild-growing dandelions and chase the tire swing as his dad pushed him on it. Winston would have loved the leaves in fall, just as Will had.

He remained there a while, chewing as he was lost to that room, and tried not to let anything else leech inside. The violins had grown quieter and somber as time passed, and Will had to wonder if he completely missed the end of the last song. The pears were delicious, as was the cubed meat which seemingly burst upon his palate. They settled some of his uneasiness, enough so that Will wiped his hands on a napkin and prepared to turn back around.

But instead stopped, staring, at the place where the table ended ten feet down the row of dishes. There was no way to be sure how long Hannibal had stood there watching Will. His pupils were dilated to an engulfing black, and his mouth parted as though panting, so soft as to be nigh undetectable. Will's skin tingled under the attention, electric—so thorough was it, and far stronger than when Will had shared his theory on the first murders with Hannibal the day before. Perhaps Will was misreading things; Hannibal was obviously stimulated from the dancing, not something as inane as Will's partaking of the food.

Why did you dance with her? Will ached to ask. *Why her?*

When neither he nor Hannibal made a move to speak, Will ducked his head toward his shoes and fought off the physical weight of their silence. In a fit to make it un-awkward—it wasn't, not really, for Hannibal's thin mouth had crooked up gently, captivated by whatever he saw in Will, a dark glitter in his eyes—softly, Will asked, "Have you heard the story of *The Garden Wall*?"

"I have," Hannibal admitted, and if he hoped for Will to look at him, he kept that desire from entering his voice. "But not until you left it behind. I find I have been driven to captivation by its final chapter." The shape of Hannibal's mouth changed then—Will was not certain how he had noticed. Condensed down to minutiae, the truth of it was a precise sorrow which hid beneath the shell of Hannibal's mask. "The portrayal of loyalty and love between siblings as undemanding is one that I need not be moved by to appreciate, but moved I was, regardless."

Now Will looked up at Hannibal, the expression on his own face no doubt rapt. "Thank you. For... everything. Bringing it back to me."

Hannibal dipped his head in acknowledgement. "You're welcome," he replied. "And I also must apologize for my rudeness. I should not have arrived un-announced as I did. Your last name is one I am familiar with, though I had not met Madame La Falce until tonight, and I knew immediately where to find you."

Will had to suppress his laughter, but still it emerged, unbidden, and he was surprised to hear the sound of his own happiness. His heart felt light in his chest, because *of course*. Will had kept from introducing himself as he had once been known—*Graham*, the name passed down to him from his dad. But in the end, it was the La Falce name which led Hannibal to him.

The very idea of someone as composed as *Hannibal*, following Will home, was absurd. Will's huffs of laughter moved up his throat, and suddenly, he found he had no control of his

mouth. “Are you ever as rude to anyone as you are to me?” Will teased, and observed Hannibal’s reaction from beneath lowered lashes.

A pause, before a familiar curiosity filled out Hannibal’s features. “I’m afraid you bring it out in me,” he teased back, a mien of indulgence about his eyes.

Another teasing remark was on the tip of Will’s tongue, but he didn’t get the chance to say it when an older gentleman, on his way past the table, bumped into Hannibal’s elbow. Somehow, in the time since Hannibal and Alessandra ended their dance and now, Hannibal had procured a flute of champagne. It jostled dangerously in his hand at the impact, though apparently Hannibal happened to have miraculous reflexes, for it did not spill.

“Oh my, my!” the man exclaimed, deafening in his enthusiasm. He was a whimpering sort; dark cropped hair and with the air of an old-fashioned academic. A professor, perhaps. He clapped a firm hand to Hannibal’s elbow now, recognition flashing across his mulish face. “My compliments to the chef!” he told Hannibal, whose gaze slid over the gentleman as if he were a minor annoyance, at best. “We had heard such great things about your catering, and what a terrific feast it has been tonight. The board is forever thankful to you, Signor Lecter.”

The gentleman did not even take a breath before prattling on, “The braised tongue, in particular, is delightfully exotic. I understand the flavor can be hard to bring out in such a dish.”

As he spoke, Hannibal merely nodded serenely where appropriate. “One would think that the tongue which speaks what the heart cannot is made more hearty by its honesty,” Hannibal said. He looked subtly pleased with himself, a thin and deviating smile which remained rather than fled. “My dishes are the most honest that they can be, Signor...”

“Dr. Fell,” the man supplied, eager, and shook Hannibal’s empty hand. “Jeremy Fell, Head of Literature.”

Hannibal’s eyes shifted, then, and his pleasure took on a different quality altogether as he stole a swallow from his champagne flute. He seemed to be studying this Dr. Fell, contemplative.

Will did not think it his place to intrude upon their conversation, and while Hannibal’s attention was diverted elsewhere, Will slipped away from the table and headed for one of the hallways which displayed the evening’s artwork. Bernard had mentioned pieces taken from the Uffizi, and Will did not want to steal any more of Hannibal’s time—his peers already thought Hannibal young, would they not also think him horribly gauche to be seen speaking with Will, a child?

A selection of paintings hung on the peripheral of the ballroom, visible to the crowd much like the one depicting the strawberry field. Some of the staff rushed to and fro here, leaden with plates of serving food as they headed out into the throngs of people. Will bypassed them easily, and was only distracted when he caught sight of a painting hidden behind one of the pillars which supported the second floor balcony.

When Will rounded the pillar, he was wholly unprepared to see Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* on the other side. A single golden light illuminated the colors of the two figures on the canvas, and sunk into the simple bronze frame which housed them. On the left, the young widow who was to be married, and beside her on the fountain, a representation of Venus—semi-nude and draped in wild, provocative red. A cherub played in the water between them.

Distantly, Will noted how quiet the ballroom had grown around him, the music and laughter fading into nothing, until Will might have been standing there completely alone. He did not quite panic at the sight of the painting, here and now, but he was unprepared for the images which forced their way into his mind. He saw Antonella Migliorini draped in the red of Venus, locked in tireless pleading—did she offer fortitude and luck in love, as the goddess might have? Or did she turn inward on her own purpose, and keep the clothed widow—Paola, her sister—for herself?

Paola's hurt burned behind Will's eyes. He swallowed through the pain, scrabbled at his bruise to remind himself that he was alive. He was not her.

Will was not panicking, but his breathing had picked up the moment the noise of the ballroom filtered back into his senses. This was Bernard's doing all along—he had known the painting would be here, and had suggested Will attend the gala to see it. *Of course.*

A horrifying idea creeped inside his head. Will startled, badly, and pivoted on his heel to dart his eyes around the room.

Could Il Mostro be here*?* Will thought, desperate. Was it possible for him to be in the very same room, flirting in and out among his chosen prey, the means of his art, each of them oblivious to the possibility of their becoming?

Will's eyes made another circuit of the room's inhabitants, the laughing faces and tinkling champagne glasses. The nauseating, rich perfume which permeated the air. Il Mostro would be charming. Patient, and seductive. Will could imagine the way he had enticed and tempted Paola and Antonella Migliorini on a dark, woodland road. They would have had inexplicable car trouble, and he would have just been passing by when he spotted them and offered his help.

The reality was that he would have been tailing them all along, calculating and waiting, until opportunity arose.

May I. The monster asked the two sisters, so polite as it drew them in. *May I. May I.*

Will would never truly see Antonella painted in the vivid coloring of her blood, but he could imagine, and he could see it—the red folds of the fabric which pooled over her shoulder, pouring down the side of her exposed chest and stomach.

It occurred to Will that the Monster of Florence could not be at the gala because of Will, either. For only Pazzi knew of his involvement, even as Il Mostro's second masterpiece unraveled before his eyes. He was only being paranoid, and yet.

And yet.

Will felt as though the monster had followed him here, too.

His neck prickled, and at his back he heard the clicking of the plated frame which held *Sacred and Profane Love* to its moorings. Whining, snapping as the layers of oil on the canvas pooled together into one single shade of colorless black, and the feathered monster from Will's dreams slowly crawled outward from it, limbs breaking and cracking, contorting as it gathered itself in the shadow cast beneath the display light, and pressed its snout into the small of Will's back.

See? Said the monster. *See?*

The noise in the ballroom became too much. Whispers rushed to fill the negative space left behind in Will's head, a blurring cacophony of voices which originated from all around him; the petty thoughts of the party goers, their simpering and frowning faces, their worries and hopes and all that Will saw in their eyes. Filling and filling, until Will was close to crumpling.

Through his panic, Will fell forward against the pillar and leant there, breathing heavily. He glanced upward through the bangs of his hair and stared out into the room for some time. He did not even know what he sought, not until his eyes found Hannibal's far across the heads of the dancers. Hannibal, whose visage was laid bare as he watched Will—palpably dark, and with undisguised consideration.

And just like that, the overwhelming press of the room receded, and Will felt at once numb and terribly softened. His vision gone foggy at the edges, as his limbs were forcibly relaxed to slackness. He melted in the empty recess of those eyes even as Hannibal tilted his head, and the maroon there swirled round, a flicker of calculation about their shadows.

The moment was broken when Hannibal looked away again.

That was the last he saw of Hannibal for the remainder of the night. Will hid behind the pillar and sunk to the floor, arms held limp against his knees. From there, he could see *Sacred and Profane Love*, and wonder if it were mocking him.

Will would not realize until hours after his mother had come to collect him, and he was returned to the safe embrace of his bedroom, that the slip of paper with Pazzi's number was gone.

Chapter End Notes

The Italian in this chapter is from a poem by Dante.

"And as my mind keeps telling me,
Love said to me 'She is Spring who springs first,
and that bears the name Love, who resembles me.'"

Chapter 6

For the first six years of Will's life, he and his dad moved around a lot. His earliest memories returned him to a one-bedroom apartment in Michigan, and to the dry burn of the wind cutting at his eyes where he lay at the front of his dad's sailboat on his stomach, the far-reaching horizons of the Great Lakes over his shoulder. Then there had been Wisconsin and Alabama, a rental in Tavernier for the briefest of months, and finally, Louisiana.

At first, leaving the places Will had come to know intimately was difficult. But as the years passed, and their stays in different states became shorter, it was easier to let go, and let himself forget. This did not always hold true—their time in Florida was still very much the hardest for Will.

Florida was almost a polar opposite to Alabama's bustling inner-city crowds. Tavernier being near the bottom-most end of the east coast, the population was small and scattered, and only a single main road ran between the islands that formed the Keys. Outside the small neighborhoods of old retirees, most houses were tiny and aging beyond repair. The place his dad had chosen was a sublet beneath another apartment, across the street from a hotel with heavy tourist traffic during the summer season.

Will remembered the lopsided slice of ocean that had been visible from their kitchen window, his feet tipping the step-stool at the sink as he peered beyond the mossy gates of the house next to theirs. At the time, it was the only thing that had sat between Will and the scraggly mangroves of the shore.

Will also remembered his first day of second grade, crammed as sardines in a closet-sized classroom with ten other kids. Even then, Will had been over-cautious and wary—he was the newest stranger in a town where everyone had known everyone for all of their lives, and for that reason, he was immediately set apart from the rest of them. But even moreso, Will didn't *want* to push for anything.

Two weeks into his schooling and his dad's new job aboard a lobster trawler, Will was amenable to the idea of never connecting with anyone his age. For when the time came again for him and his dad to move on, things would be much simpler than the times that came before. No more messy, loose ends from the fragile-spined friendships Will had so carefully initiated with others.

He told himself he could become comfortable with his solitude, and himself. But he did not achieve that comfort in Tavernier.

Then, miraculously, Hannah happened.

Hannah was not in Will's class, but two below it. The kindergarten was housed within the same off-road elementary school in town and had even fewer students. But more importantly was that Hannah was just like Will—ostracized, for her strangeness and ill-attempts at socializing

Hannah was deaf, and she communicated in fragmented sign language by her own choice. Neither did she talk much, instead creating the sort of scratching, guttural noises in the deepest part of her throat that a dog might. Will liked this quality about her. The honesty of it, and the pieces of sign language she taught him in between. *Sleepy*, or *hungry,* or *where blanket?* The one she devised to represent Will's name was a tiny fist, her thumb popping out the bottom like the head of a curious turtle, and the same reedy, low breath of noise punctuating it every time.

She liked the quality where Will heard her noises, and listened, far more.

They shared in their similarities, cleaving together in the face of the other students who Will knew laughed at Hannah behind their hands. To hide her away, or perhaps more to spite them, he would use the two blankets granted to them at naptime to construct a fort beneath one of the desks. There, Hannah would lie on her back in the folds, her hair—brown and curled like Will's—fanned out around her heart-shaped face, and Will would read to her slow passages from *The Garden Wall*.

The book was in French, of course, but Will was teaching her just as she was him.

Two days before Will's dad announced they were to leave the state and the Keys for good, he took Will and Hannah to have a picnic. They drove to one of the island bridges and parked in the unmarked sand on the side of the road; from there, Will grabbed Hannah's hand and led her down the slope to the empty strip of beach beneath the concrete beams.

Hannah did not know how to swim, but she had the sort of floats made for babies, and which swelled to eclipse her arms when his dad blew air into them. That didn't stop her from kicking out her feet like she were a seal, humming at the cracked pieces of sanddollar Will sifted from the seaweed. Or Will's even greater discovery: a hermit crab larger than the sum of his hands, and housed within a venus comb shell the color of brackish sand.

When he showed it to Hannah, gently lifting it so as to be seen below the water's surface. her dark eyes grew round and quiet, and rather than hum, she jerked her arms up to sign *home*.

"*Maison*," Will repeated back to her, dragging out the French vowels so that she may see them, and learn.

For the next hour, Will would later hear from his dad that he saw nothing but their backs as they waded around the shallow water, tracking the hermit crab's cyclical path through the wavering grass.

It had been a Friday, the sun hot and bright in the cloudless sky; Will would not know they were leaving until his dad packed up that Sunday. Though he never had the chance to say goodbye to Hannah after that day in the ocean, he had the worst sunburn of his life to show for it, stretching over his shoulders and blanketing his back.

The pain had been excruciating. Will curled on his belly in the backseat of the car for the long ride to Louisiana, and felt as much branded by Hannah as they had both been by their curiosity. He did not cry for her, not once. Though perhaps Will's sorrow heavied the air,

nevertheless, for in the tremulous quiet his dad had asked, “Hey kid, you ever heard about the method of loci?”

Will had shook his head into the backseat’s itchy upholstery. His dad did not see this, but somehow he still knew.

“They called them Roman Rooms in ancient times. Rooms in the mind where we can keep faces and memories. Establish order when things get hard to breathe, and fear forgetting them.” His dad’s voice was rhythmic, the kind of soft, southern drawl Will heard in his head the nights his dreams kept him asleep. “I know you loved her with all you had, Will. But these things... they’re not preventable. Someday you might not even remember what it was you forgot.”

Will’s back was made of burning branches, but that pain was the foundation of the hall of rooms he created in his mind. And at the door at its end, the taste of saltwater burning altogether differently in his mouth. The noises of the ocean lay behind the sturdy wood. Will remembered it in all its components, and Hannah there, happy, before turning and locking the door behind him.

Almost two weeks after the gala, no news of Il Mostro had yet to surface. The first of these nights had Will falling asleep to nightmares. In some, he stood in a forest and heard his monster’s rasping breath against his ear, a match to that of the gaping mouths of the Botticelli victims in the dark behind his eyes. In others, he was caught in the stillness of a woodland road in Montespertoli, helplessly mute as a black-feathered stag ran out in front of a moving car and sent it crashing into the trees.

Only after Paola and Antonella’s car had been consumed by the blackening branches was Will able to approach. The stag lay bleeding out on the dirt. Its chest heaving, and labored. When Will touched his fingers to the jagged, messed feathers, they felt much like human hair. Then he parted them, and saw the skin beneath turning blue and sunken.

The stag began to scream as water filled its lungs.

Will woke much the same these nights. Cold to the bone despite the mound of blankets weighing down his chest, and unable to quiet his chattering teeth. He was not sure how it started, or what compelled him to it in his sleepy state of mind. He only knew that he started waking to Hannibal’s suit jacket curled around his arms, tucked beneath his head on the pillow. The scent of it was calming, and akin to a warm and familiar hand clasped at the nape of Will’s neck. He began holding the jacket against his stomach at night, just before falling asleep, and the nightmares did not bother him again.

During the days, however, Will found no comfort from the thoughts that haunted him. The gala, particularly—he had convinced himself, with difficulty, that the paper Pazzi had given him with the inspector’s number had merely been misplaced. A foolish consequence of Will’s discovery of the painting, *Sacred and Profane Love*, and his resulting panic.

For it was as Will decided then: Il Mostro could have known that the painting was there, but certainly not of Will's involvement. The slip of paper was...lost. Irretrievable, with Will finding himself suddenly cast at sea. He no longer had the advantage of Inspector Pazzi at his disposal. He had only himself, and for that he knew he must tread delicately.

Yet this, too, appeared unnecessary. For three months now Il Mostro's recreations of Italian artwork had been discovered in and around the province of Florence. Like clockwork, the cogs of which ticked away in the spaces where light could not reach. Eight murders so far as the Italian Polizia was made aware, each of them in pairs. Couples. And all of them romantic save for that of the sisters, Paola and Antonella—though, of course, Will knew better than this.

But now, there was nothing. Before, hardly a week would pass between Il Mostro's murders, then there had been the Botticelli, *Primavera*, and the denouncement of the selfish sisters within days of one another. Will could not imagine whether this angered or upset Inspector Pazzi, or perhaps further steeled his resolve to catch this monster. Not without trying, Will could not locate any pictures or details of the previous murders—kept from the press, most likely, until their escalation made crime scenes more difficult to secure from reporters. Thus Will had only his imagination to guide his hand.

It worried Will, all the same. There was that ugly, clawed part of him buried far below his outer guise. An un-shakable curiosity that had been born with Will, in him, where it could fester and bloom into poisonous urges. The tableaus horrified Will, but likewise filled him with a riveting sensation of enticement. It drove him to his imaginings, of Il Mostro killing again, and what masterpiece the Monster of Florence would choose next.

To know Il Mostro halfway was to know Il Mostro not at all. Will could not keep himself away.

After the gala, Alessandra had not noticed the unresponsive quality of Will's staring. Though silence was not unusual for him, she was pre-occupied with the sweeping grandiosity of the evening, the superior taste of the buffet and refinement of the dancing. She was pleased, and gushed for a while afterwards at how nice it would be for Will to attend another. "*And that young man*," Alessandra had nearly purred, face sharpening in remembrance of Hannibal's skillful command of their dance. "*Can you believe that he praised me for your good manners?"* She'd laughed, low and delighted. "*He asked if I took you out often*."

This was how the end of the second week saw Will: blinking up into the sunlight which carried over the hedgerows of an enormous terrace. The crowd was thinner than had been at the gala, and featured men and women dressed down in high-fashion sundresses and slacks. Like Will, the younger children in attendance wore shorts more fitting for their age, though his mother would never relieve him of the blue ribbon knotted loose beneath his starched collar.

The garden party being held at the Castello di Montegufoni today was purely social. The castle was old and too ostentatious for Will's tastes—sprawling, and with vaulted interiors painted in bright frescoes by the hands of many an artist. He was not allowed the chance to wander past the hill-facing terrace where the host's guests flocked, but on the way inside, he had glimpsed trellis archways overgrown with purple wisteria and wildflowers that led out

into the trees and around the grounds. Those interested him far more than the abhorrent color coordination he was subjected to amongst the other guests and buffet tables.

It was a testament to Will's muted demeanor that he did not outright sneer at those who circled him. All of them had dressed in white—including Will, in a fitted shirt and suit jacket selected by Alessandra. So too were the tables and over-powdered desserts, the caulk and sun-whitened stone of the Castello's facade, and the unrestored weathering of the outdoor sculptures that dotted the rows. There was an odd use of bleached coral for decoration, as well, scattered about the tables and strung aside lanterns from the arches. These he did not detest quite so much; the coral had been alive once, just as the stag skull he recalled from the gala, but petrified into rough, flaking branches not as smooth to the touch as antlers.

The juxtaposition of the white coral with the dilute red of the brickwork and neatly trimmed grass was less interesting than the skull and roses had been. Too neat. With a thumb, Will rubbed at a groove on a rather convoluted piece, which lay covering a bowl of caviar like a cavern of roots. His thumb came back covered in a thin layer of dust the same off-putting white.

As expected, Alessandra had carried off into the crowd and left Will to his own company for the time being. This would not hold for long; she did so enjoy introducing him to her rich acquaintances. But it did allow Will the chance to close his eyes and hold very, very still. Soaking in the sunlight while he could. The Castello was not far from the city, but out here the air was home to something less tame.

Truer still, for the garden party was in Montespertoli.

Will was not far from where the bodies of Paola and Antonella Migliorini had been found.

Will had to wonder how easy it would be, slipping off through the hooded trellis and hedges and escaping into the woods. Would it be easy to find where Paola and Antonella had been displayed? Would Will know it—*see* it—without being led? But led he was, for the pull of Il Mostro's *Sacred and Profane Love* in his mind was more than magnetic. Ravenous, and craving for completion. This would be Will's only chance to see Il Mostro's canvas of choice in person. The bodies and blood were long gone by now, but the well still stood. And it was out there calling to him.

A presence sidled up to the table alongside Will. He knew without looking that it was not an adult, but someone Will's size—another boy.

"Do I know you?" this boy began, tapping his fingers against the tablecloth as he tipped his head at Will. Will's eyes moved steadily from the other boy's fingers to his face. "It's just that I saw you from behind, standing over there, and for a second it was..."

The boy sounded curiously nervous, though his accent held the airiness of the upperclass and was more than suitable for the likes of the party. Proper English. However, as Will's gaze traveled upward he noted the other boy's rich but well-worn clothes, the curls of his unruly hair tucked beneath his collar.

Like looking in a mirror, Will completed the thought. For he and Will were of a similar height and build, a pale blue shared between their eyes.

The other boy was studying Will's face in honest amusement. His lips turned over easily into a baffled, but not displeased, grin, and he laughed beneath his breath, a touch uneasy, at the same time that Will did. Mirroring, again. Their laughs grew uneasier still.

"Anthony," the boy introduced instantly, his face a continuous thing which brightened wholly with his voice. "Anthony Dimmond. A pleasure to make the acquaintance of my long-lost twin."

Will fought the stiffening of his spine at the pleasantry. The longer he was here, the less time he would have to slip away. He had decided it, now. He would be gone a half hour at most, and his mother would be occupied until then.

He also did not know how he felt about Anthony Dimmond's zealous attention.

"Will," he offered in return, and nothing else. Then much softer, as his eyes dipped down to his fingers beside the coral roots and bowl of caviar, "A pleasure." Anthony's fingers had inched closer to his own.

The best weapon Will had in these instances of social niceties was shyness. But Anthony did not appear put-off, in any sense. His smile grew wider by many degrees, dimpling, and he leant in to Will conspiratorially. "I can see you hate these things just as much as I do. Now I don't feel quite so alone, so thank you for that."

Harmless chatting. It didn't hurt, but the more Anthony spoke, the more obvious it became that he was acting almost expectant. Intent. Will could not make himself meet Anthony's eyes —but still it made him wonder. Anthony beamed far too much for a boy Will's age. Though perhaps Will's experience was not the best example to go by, with these things.

"Something of interest in the caviar?" Anthony joked, and Will had to jerk his eyes up from the bowl and coral, caught soundly by the mournful quirk in Anthony's mouth. "Horrible, I always thought, to eat the eggs. And they must kill the sturgeon to do it. They'll cut into the abdomen to check for texture, shape, ripeness... if the feed's not to standard, sew her up and throw her back out. She lives to reproduce another year."

When Will remained silent, Anthony affected a shrug. "Lousy knowledge, I know. But I'm a voracious reader. Though I'd like to be the one doing the writing, one day."

Why are you telling me this? Will thought.

"It's good. To know things." *I'm a voracious reader myself*, Will carefully did not say. The newspaper, particularly.

Quiet fell between them, and Will looked instead to the trees beyond the hedges. How best to lose Anthony Dimmond?

“I didn’t catch your last name,” Anthony added, after another moment. He let the question hang there.

“I,” Will said, and flashed his eyes over toward a set of passing waiters. “I have to go.” Before Anthony could open his mouth again, Will ducked between the waiters—startling them, as they raised their trays above him—and disappeared into the crowd.

From there, he crept into the maze of hedges which decorated the outer section of the terrace. Where the brick dropped off to the grassy slope of the hill, Will shucked his jacket and tucked it under a bush. It would remain relatively clean there, and free of the dirt he was sure to accumulate. The same would not be true for his shoes, but they were a dark grey, at least, and not stainable white.

Will could not be certain how long he walked. The trees were sparse closer to the terrace, but thickened as he picked his way through the weeds and underbrush. He hadn’t a particular direction in mind; what he felt within his veins and sinew was incapable of description, instinctual. The press of a snout at his back, compelling him to see what others might not.

There was no way to tell the time of the morning save the height of the sun. It dappled the dirt where light broke through the canopy, and jumped and moved with the cool breeze. Will paid no mind to the state of his clothes. His attention had turned toward the sisters like the point of a compass shifting north, drawn together by invisible forces. Paola, Antonella. The child caught between them.

It brought idle thought to *The Garden Wall*, and what Will imagined as himself, scaling the wall to track down the monster that prowled it nightly. But the monster would not be out here to be found. Will was sure of that.

By the time a half hour had surely come and gone, Will was prepared to turn back. The woodland here was quiet, eerily so, and no birds or small animals made any noise to speak of. He had been following the road which led away from Florence, rather than toward, under cover of the trees which hid him from passing cars. However, there had been none of those either; as soon as the bustle of the garden party had disappeared at his back, only silence filled its place.

He diverted back toward the road until it was visible from between the leaved branches, and started, at the sight of a crumpled tree closest to where the dirt gave away to gravel. It was not so much bent as it was cracked; contorted as if recently hit by a car, for the tree’s wound was fresh, and unhealed. The dirt, as well, had been disturbed. Weeds and long grass flattened further out. It left a noticeable trail from the road and back into the wooded brush.

He noticed now the flowers, long stalks of faded pink foxglove and moss draped heavily from the overhanging boughs. The kind that flourished best in damp, wet soil.

Will was close.

He felt it now. Lilting, coaxing, like a hook wedged up underneath his ribs. Catching there. The pull.

There was a subtle scent to the air, sweet. It turned Will's stomach just as it drew him in. The ground became soft underfoot, and Will knew immediately that this was where the Polizia had so recently treaded. The scent became stronger, and Will could not be certain—was it the blood in his mind which he smelled, or was it something real?

It wasn't. Or at least, the well was a lone landmark in the small clearing where Will emerged. Spotless, as far as he could see, and yet so reverently thrumming with the weight of what it had become.

Will approached slowly, telegraphing his steps—to himself, if not to anyone else. And as he reached the well, he cocked his head at the spot where Paola had once sat. He could feel her presence, burning there. But more than that, he could see her.

She did not gaze off into the woods as she had been directed to by Il Mostro. The puppet on its childish strings. No—now she stared at Will, her eyes shuttered and removed, but a color of beseeching hurt to the slight line of her mouth. The monster at his back did not ask Will to see, this time. Will felt, instead, the pain of Paola's loss and bereavement.

Antonella's gaze rested heavier on Will. She did not beseech; rather, her eyes darkened with her jealousy, and it came to overfill Will's chest and upwards his throat. Spilling over, until Will felt he might shake with rage, and undirected need. It felt not so different to his aching observation of Hannibal and Alessandra's dance—the recreation of Zephyrus and Chloris, in that moment, which had reminded Will of Hannibal's soothing words in the gallery. Of a sketchbook, filled to the brim with understanding.

Will did not share easily, and neither had Antonella.

He regarded the apparition of her now, chin dipping in acceptance and deference.

The well gave no indication of what had transpired atop its stonework. Il Mostro was methodical. He maintained perfect care of where the sisters' blood fell and moved to fill. He hadn't killed them in the clearing, then; he had done that in their car where he found them. Then he had brought them here, and laid them down like brushstrokes on the carpeted leaves and flowering foxglove.

Will bent down to better study the weathering of the stones, a sheen to them where they flickered green in the light. A fissure of cracks nettled the well's lip, and over its edge he could stare down into a short but thorough darkness. The air was musty overhead, and carried upward the stale dampness of old, unused water. On the inside lip, some of the cracks glistened beneath their shadows. Ruby, then black again. Was Will imagining it?

He reached out, tentatively, to touch.

"I thought maybe you had brought a girl from the party out here," came the proper sound of Anthony's voice from behind him, entirely at odds with the wild state of the trees and the decrepit, forgotten well.

Will did not startle, nor did he allow a hint of surprise to enter his expression. He felt a fleeting shade of it, niggling at the base of his skull. It was not annoyance, rather it was

curiosity.

Somehow, Anthony had grown that much more interesting.

Anthony's words still hung in the air after he had trailed off, an inherent question that simmered in the heat of the sunlit patches beneath the leaves. The other boy stood a scarce number of feet away, close enough to see a remarkable semblance of Will's own gaze reflected back at him. But their eyes could not have been more different.

There was an aching loneliness in Anthony wholly unlike Will, and unlike Hannibal. Where Hannibal's was a controlled burning, consumption of oneself, Anthony's caught at the edges and gave tremulous way to ash.

"Why would you think that?" Will asked, honestly curious for the answer. A question for a question.

Anthony chuckled lowly. The nervous strain had fled, replaced with courage and resolve, both. "I'm sorry. It's just, when I saw you I thought..."

"That you knew me?"

Anthony shook his head, but did not step closer. "I can't quite explain it."

Will looked away again, back to the well, and the dual faces of Paola and Antonella who watched him. Their scrutiny was like static across his skin. Tingling, and quiet.

A rustle of fabric as Anthony shifted, unsure and uncertain. "Something on your mind?" he asked, hesitant and a touch shy. "Or some*one*, I guess I should say."

"Someones," Will answered cryptically, and stared past Antonella's cruel visage to the inside of the well. How far did it go down? he wondered. How far did you want them to?

He entertained the idea of the well as the place of disposal for Paola's heart and Antonella's tongue. Their graves, defiled in the untouchable dark. Take the heart because Paola was so free with it, take the tongue because Antonella was not. But where did their ends match up? Why take them at all, if not to add to the majesty of the masterpiece?

Will thought of white coral growing like roots from the well's murky bottom, bleaching, dead, from the lack of sunlight. He thought of fish weaving between their many-armed skeletons, and he thought of their eggs, harvested from their bellies before they could grow swollen and fertile with life.

If the feed's not to standard, sew her up and throw her back out.

The feed, which was harvested into expensive delicacy.

A wave of vertigo overtook Will, and acid surged up his throat to battle with his gag reflex. He collapsed on his forearms over the well's edge, and breathed through the static and encroaching black at the edges of his vision.

Then Anthony was at Will's side, patting his back firmly between the shoulders. Friendly, but not too companionable or forward. Anthony was kind, in truth. He would not overstep boundaries, even when Will was the type to have none at all.

"You're a strange one," was all Anthony commented, before moving back to give Will space again. The loping, dog-like grin was evident enough in his tone. "Care to go back to the party, now? It might do your head better, and your stomach."

Of course, Anthony would assume that Will had only wandered off to clear his head.

But the reality was not so simple, much less the cogs which were clicking about in Will's mind.

Ding dong, Il Mostro ate his harvest.

Chapter 7

Will's nightmares did not worsen in the nights following his visit to Montespertoli. On the contrary, he hardly slept at all, and where sleep evaded him, insomnia soon took hold. Over, and over again, Will attempted to reason with himself. There were bits and pieces of Il Mostro's victims that were missing—noted, in both the article for the Botticelli murders and that of the Titian sisters. Will had not initially seen the blurb in the first; his Italian was not the best, but with so many hours at his disposal late into the night, he had time to pour over the words until he feared he knew them by heart.

The married professors, mutilated with reverence, had been sewn cleanly back together after individual organs were removed. The sutures, delicate cross-stiches of black embedded in pale skin, had been applied with discipline. The wife, Henrietta Mancini, was found to be bereft of her lungs. While the husband, Vincent, his liver. In light of these findings, Il Mostro was suspected of having prior medical knowledge.

"Modus operandi," Will had whispered to himself beneath the bedcovers that first night, *The Garden Wall* propped open on his pillow and a flashlight drifting over the spread of his growing collection: the misguided sketch of *Sacred and Profane Love* that Will had drawn the same evening as the gala, the blurry tabloid shot of the sisters in the woods, and of course, his black and white photograph of the *Primavera* and its matching, crumpled clipping.

Trophies, came the accompanying whisper in Will's mind.

The connection was a stretch. Any investigator would say as much. Will still had no way of contacting Inspector Pazzi, however, it was not quite so difficult to imagine Pazzi's consideration of the theory. Pazzi would not set the idea aside, would see it from all its odd angles, just as Will had. But in the darkest depths of Will's memory, he knew Il Mostro, and Will saw him there, too. It felt... right. A jigsaw puzzle coming together, and meant to complete a larger whole. Il Mostro elevated his victims to art, and a masterpiece was something to be consumed, was it not?

Even now, three nights later, Will's stomach tightened and trembled at the thoughts which surfaced, unbidden, in the wake of his discovery. He knew his imagination had been getting away from him, of late, but this had not been more true than for the hours he spent lying awake in bed. Heart was known to taste like veal to unrefined palates. Will imagined Paola's aching hurt would have turned the meat almost bitter, only for it to bleed, a hint of saccharine, at the finely folded edges of aorta and artery. Will had tasted veal, several times in fact, on the rare occasion that his dad brought it home—back when they'd lived in Wisconsin. The taste was smooth, tender; disintegrating down to its parts before his teeth even had chance to bite down.

In the back of Will's mouth, saliva pooled in the depression of his tongue, where it stayed. His stomach grumbled. Will had not eaten in nearly twenty-four hours; anything he had

attempted to swallow since Montespertoli, since the woods, settled wrongly on the way down. What he did manage, he eventually vomited back up again.

He knew better than to allow his lack of appetite to show. In the days since, he had begged off meals in the parlor in favor of taking it in his drawing room, in order to practice with the harpsichord, or so the maids were led to believe. In truth, music seemed to be the only fitting distraction from the unsavory thoughts that plagued him—that of the bleeding heart and tied tongue, the transformation of which became heady delicacy when orchestrated by Il Mostro's skilled hands.

Will would play until his fingers began to ache and his eyes droop. Long, advanced melodies he'd learned under his music tutors' guidance, and as the evenings turned over into night, his food would go cold and uneaten on the bench beside him. At his most exhausted, Will's hands would smooth over the keys and fall into the dips and notes of lullabies he thought he had long forgotten. Their recollection was easy, comforting. The French words that belonged to them he sang quietly beneath his breath as he played. Others, Will remembered only their lilting swells, which chased away the oily shadows of his room.

La Réciprocité was one he had composed the same night his insomnia began. A gentle wordless thing, Will couldn't help but picture his dad's sailboat as he played it. Notes carrying like the steadying rock of the waves had under the boat's curved hull. Reciprocity, the drag of the shifting current back and forth. Will hummed, low, as his fingers fell across the keys, and the colors of dusk deepened outside the windows. Thoughts of Il Mostro's harvest fled, in place of them.

Unlike the nights that came before, Will did not feel up to returning to bed. Once the last notes of the lullaby faded into silence, he turned on the harpsichord's bench and regarded his bedroom mirror, which stood in view of the open double doors that separated the two rooms.

Hannibal's suit jacket still hung there, returned as it was, always, when Will rose in the mornings. Even the smoke and wood burned into the fabric was not enough to soothe Will's unsettled mind into sleep. He had tried, the night following his visit to the well, lying very still and very awake on his mattress with the jacket pressed to his chin and mouth. But the imagined taste of Paola and Antonella, twined together sweetly in the grooves along the roof of his mouth, haunted him too thoroughly to allow for more than fragmented half-rest scattered throughout the early hours.

Will wondered if he had truly gotten too close, to be affected so completely by theories he couldn't even prove to himself. But the way the tastes slipped down his throat and upset his belly with nausea was more than pure intuition. It felt more than right, like Will was glimpsing something of the monster that no other had before him.

And for that, it felt intimate.

Will picked himself up from the bench and wandered over to the mirror. In the shadow of the room, he saw nothing of his reflection save for his unformed, misshapen shape. The jacket came easily down into his arms at his tug, and draped across them warmly despite the chill of the room. He was not sure how the idea came to be, but he had the faintest, fluttery stirrings

in his gut, which compelled him to pull the jacket over his shoulders and make his way over to the balcony.

He could not be sure, either, which he hated more. The nightmares, or his sudden insomnia. Will's stomach twisted up into knots as he stepped carefully up to the balustrade, peering down and across the darkened garden, all the while forcing his tumultuous thoughts to flatline, and then whiten out into nothing.

Holding the lapels of the jacket close to his chest with one hand, Will climbed over the balustrade and slipped down the ivy into the garden below. The hem of his pajama bottoms dragged in the dew-laden grass, the same as his bare feet as they sunk downward into damp and wet. He could smell the rose bushes, stronger since the light rain that had arrived in the evening, and adding weight to the air that circulated round—caught, between the high walls of the courtyard.

Will thought, instead, to Winston. Whether Hannibal had kept his promise, and Winston was safe. It was cold, tonight, and Will ached to imagine Winston stuck out in the rain—fur matted down slickly to the dog's bony and dirtied flesh. He pushed the image away as quickly as it had come.

Without shoes, and with only Hannibal's jacket as a buffer between his t-shirt and the biting wind, Will set out into the street beyond the courtyard gate. He hadn't a destination in mind—there was no murder to draw him in, none to speak of in the past weeks. Il Mostro was likely just as awake as Will was, out here in the dark; biding, waiting.

Who would be next to meet their creation?

This time, Will physically shook his head to dispel those questions from entering his head and taking hold. He opted once more for fuzzing out all else, and focused on the fall of his feet in the irregular stonework of the alleyways he slipped through. At so early an hour, well after midnight, the ambiance of Florence was muted like a dream, the lights in the wide streets nearest the Palazzo dim and distant.

The sounds of people, too, were more subdued, sparse where they originated and only occasionally drifting down to Will from windows as he passed beneath apartments. If anyone still out in the streets noticed him, they didn't have precedence to care, or stop him.

Unthinking, Will had begun to hum his lullaby once more. *La Réciprocité,* rising and falling as he dodged the headlights of cars which bounced, intermittent, from the eaves of storefronts and the diverging corners of avenues. A wave of fragile calm fell over Will, his eyes lidded as he continued to hum, and he only paused for breath a short time later, when he reached the middling arch of the Ponte Santa Trìnita.

It was an old and beautiful sight, even in the dark; a narrow bridge which faced out over the stilled waters of the Arno on either side. In the faint light which carried up from the city, and the reflective gaily-yellow faces of the buildings which crowded the banks, the splendor of ancient Florence was softened, restrained in so much as the shadowed buildings drew far more attention to the hazy outline formed by the sloping rooftops. Will propped his arms on

the tall ledge, facing out over the water, and studied the stone shape of the Ponte Vecchio bridge further downriver.

The city never slept, for even so late, violins could be heard. It was indistinct enough as to not take away from Will's humming. Instead, the two melodies melded together and became one. Will hid his mouth in the collar of the overlarge suit jacket, and smiled. His head, finally, felt emptied.

He had become so jumbled, mentally, with his close study of Italian the last several nights, that his return to French for the songs he both composed and recalled for the harpsichord were a welcome return to familiarity. Though *La Réciprocité* did not have words, it had feelings, and those sensations certainly had names to them. He saw his dad's face in them, and the places he had once called home back in America.

Distantly, the rumble of an engine could be heard as it crossed over the bridge behind him. Will focused hard on the music, closed his eyes, and mumbled the French words into the bend of his arm.

Then abruptly, the rumbling stopped, and the air around Will shifted.

Tiredly, Will twisted on his folded elbows to regard the source of the noise. A short distance from where he huddled against the ledge, a black, sleekly painted motorcycle rested between the thighs of an equally sleekly dressed person. Their figure was not bulky, rather they were leanly built, and kept safe from the chilly night air beneath an attractively-lined Belstaff jacket. Will's eyes crept upward to meet the darkened visor of the rider's helmet, where he watched the lights from the city writhe and reflect back at him across the glass.

"Bonsoir," said the rider from beneath the drawn visor, in a deep and richly accented voice which Will would have recognized anywhere.

Will's fingers tightened painfully in the lapels of the suit jacket, the bones of his knuckles grinding where they pressed together. His eyes did not leave the rider's visor. "Hannibal?" he breathed out shakily.

The rider raised a gloved hand to lift the helmet up and off their shoulders, and revealed in its place the pleasant, high-boned countenance of Hannibal's handsome face. His hair was longer than Will remembered. Looser, a little rougher. Though perhaps purely the result of the different styling—bangs fallen forward in Hannibal's eyes, rather than combed back—and the added effect of being windswept.

"Will," he replied in kind, the intonation of which was seemingly gratified. Will wanted to look away from the pleased tilt of Hannibal's mouth, but there was no world where he could have done so—certainly not this one. It was just as pleasing a sight to watch unfurl there.

For a long and lengthening moment, Will was at a loss for words. He did not know how it was possible—running into Hannibal again, and at such a time as this. Hot, gushing heat filled his chest, and Will knew his face must have been very red. He did not know whether to be thankful for the distant lighting which fell across the water of the Arno at his side. Hannibal, at least, would not see the color in Will's cheeks.

“What are you doing here?” Will managed, after several beats too long. The resultant meeting of their gazes had been overlong as they stared at each other. Now, Will was unsure whether he should be feeling odd for it, but all he could feel was warmth and elation. Hannibal was *here*.

Two and a half weeks since the gala, Will was so certain that Hannibal would have returned to France by now. In reality, they could not have been any closer to each other.

The hand in which Hannibal held the helmet rested upon his hip, while the other he laid on the motorcycle’s handle and smoothed, gentle and petting, over and across the throttle. “I could ask you the same thing,” Hannibal replied, remarkable for how at ease he sounded. It was far too late, Will knew. Too late for most people to be up still outside of their own beds. Though it rankled, Will also knew that anyone else would be scandalized by his presence out here, on his own and alone.

Hannibal gave no such indication. There was a reason Will felt so at ease in the man’s presence; even now, the tight hold Will had of the suit jacket was loosening, and Will at once relaxed.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Will said, and flexed his fingers on the jacket’s lapels. “The walk was hardly ten minutes. I’m not lost.”

A slight tilting of Hannibal’s head came in answer. “I did not say that you were,” he replied, gentle. His eyes were not quite so dark in the reflective light. A lighter shade of maroon, just as gentle in their regard of Will as his voice. “I only wondered at what you were seeing, out there.” Those eyes jumped away, toward the Ponte Vecchio and the domed building cresting behind it.

If they were to always meet like this, fleeting and sudden, Will could not find it in him to resent it. He was the happiest, now, that he had been since the evening of the gala, and all the darkness that had rushed to fill the rooms of his mind in the intervening weeks. Will had not had much chance to wonder if he would ever see Hannibal again, so taken was he with his contemplation of Il Mostro’s murders, and the visions which haunted him endlessly. Will only hoped that Hannibal would not be so quick to notice the deep smudges beneath his eyes —from tiredness and his repentant, longing hunger.

This, of course, was too much to even hope.

“My thoughts have been... untasty, lately. I came here to be free of them,” Will said, turning his face away, but not before he witnessed Hannibal’s eyes flick back to his face, and sharpen there.

“I attended a seminar tonight at the university,” Hannibal began, tone grown impossibly softer. “It ran late, as did the conversation after, and I fear I have not eaten for some time. Such short notice, I realize, but would you care to join me for dinner?”

That attention had less the quality than it had at the gala. Now it was molten, rather than electric, and seemed to hollow Will out only to fill him up with renewed warmth. Will chanced a sideways glance, and caught the way Hannibal’s eyes had dipped in the subtle play

of the half-light. Flickering, red and then black again as Hannibal leant forward across the handles of his motorcycle.

This was how Will knew that Hannibal had noticed the suit jacket. Hannibal's own, less shimmery in the dark, but no doubt of a finer make than anything Will owned. Draped over Will's shoulders like it was now, the state of Will's muddied pajama bottoms was enough to paint an altogether too-vulnerable picture. Thankfully, Hannibal did not deign to mention the presence of his missing suit jacket. Instead, he sat back on the motorcycle's seat, and created between his chest and the elegant slant of the handles a space just large enough for Will to fit, if he so chose.

And chose, Will did.

It was largely exhaustion which kept Will from voicing the faintest protest. Any other time and place, he would have resisted something so dangerous. He had seen motorcycles ridden, in practice, but had never dreamt of riding one himself. In this case, however, Hannibal clearly wanted Will in front rather than holding on from behind.

Hesitating only briefly, Will approached the motorcycle to stand at Hannibal's side. He eyed the vehicle with distant concern, and nearly hesitated again before he felt Hannibal's fingertips at his elbow—the only warning Will received before the helmet was lowered onto his head. The night was even darker beneath the visor, but not enough that Will missed the indulgence once more written on Hannibal's face.

"I won't let go," Hannibal remarked teasingly. "You can trust me, Will."

Beneath the visor, Will blew out a quiet raspberry of held breath, before throwing his leg over the motorcycle seat and, without meaning to, sliding back promptly to slot into the curve of Hannibal's chest and surprisingly soft stomach.

"Sorry," Will mumbled, and tried to shift minutely forward. Hannibal let him, chuckling almost inaudibly behind Will's nape. A puff of air scattered the curls there.

"The ride isn't long, I promise." Hannibal started the engine again, and kicked at the bike to set it in gear. "Place your hands at the center, there, and you'll be fine."

Will obeyed quickly, grabbing onto the lip of the cushion seconds before the motorcycle roared to life and took off. The rumbling of mechanisms beneath the seat trembled upward through Will's body, exhilarating and undeniably powerful. But paling, in comparison to the barely-there pressure of Hannibal's body bent forward over Will's back. Though Hannibal's arms brushed just shy of Will's shoulders, the thick muscle hidden away beneath the leather of Hannibal's jacket was more evident now than Will had ever noticed beforehand. In that way, Hannibal and the motorcycle were astonishingly alike.

Just as Hannibal promised, the ride lasted no more than five minutes. There and then gone again, something startlingly akin to disappointment burned at the fringe of Will's mind. He didn't have the chance to identify the feeling, because then Hannibal was cutting through the last of the thin traffic in the wide street, slipping easily between cars like a knife through butter, and had made one last turn into a small, lamp-lit parking area.

“Our stop,” Hannibal stated, once the bike had broken speed and they were braking alongside the empty sidewalk. A few older models were lined up down the row. Hannibal parked neatly at the end, and stepped down from his seat before assisting Will in doing the same.

There were very few propensities of the wealthy and high class that threw Will off-kilter, these days. But when Hannibal led Will inside the cozily lit foyer of the apartment building, Will found himself brought to awe in the face of the simple, leaved frescoes which painted the ceiling. The marble of the floors was a bold, earthen brown, and coupled with the golden faces of the walls, Will felt a mixture of safety, and... satisfaction. He tilted his head back to trace the curling, tawny shades of the vines with his roving eyes—a shade just off from the muddled background, making the pattern of leaves much more natural for how they blended together.

Hannibal’s Florence apartment was both exactly what Will expected, and not at all. Not overly ostentatious, but spacious, and aglow with the same orange hues as Will remembered fondly of the Uffizi’s corridors. Everything was made of the same fashionably aged and polished wood—the beams grafted to the arches of the expansive kitchen, the long and exquisite dining table, and the lacquered cabinets which encircled the dining room itself, each housing their own set of strange artifacts. Oriental fans and intricately-designed sheathes for knives. Feathers of every sort, white peacock and melanistic shrike. Encased butterfly wings in another. And in many of the rest, shelf upon shelf of books.

Beyond the dining room was a small sitting area which held two armchairs, closely pulled together around a glass-top table, and which sat before a grand set of balcony doors that put Will’s to shame. Will entered into this room slowly, taking it in with rapt attention as the sounds of Hannibal moving about in the kitchen echoed down the hallway. There was another difference between Will’s rooms and Hannibal’s—though this residence was not permanent for Hannibal, it still overflowed with an awareness of self. Of Hannibal, in all its fixings. The patterned fabric of the armchairs were much like the foyer fresco, though far more delicate; a shimmery red behind the dark silhouettes of garlanded flowers.

Like Hannibal’s suit jacket, which Will still clung to in the open space of Hannibal’s living room. And like the flowers Will had at one time marveled at, spilling forth from the gaping mouth of the nymph Chloris. Only now, the reminder of the *Primavera* brought a sad, depreciating smile to Will’s own mouth.

Music started from somewhere down the hall. The work of a gramophone spinning on its needle. Quiet, hushed piano. Carefully, Will let the jacket slip from his shoulders and down his arms. He folded it, neat as he could manage, and laid it over the arm of one of the chairs.

There was a small noise from behind Will, a soft clicking against the clean floorboards. He pivoted round on his feet and was stunned silent—at the sight of Winston, looking up at Will in the entryway to the dining room. Winston appeared in better health than Will could have ever hoped; fur a glossy, freshly-washed gold beneath the unfocused glow of the lights.

Will could have sobbed. Instead, he dropped to his knees and reached a hesitant, faintly quivering hand forward to occupy the distance between them. “Hey, boy,” Will whispered, voice wet with unshed tears, “What have you been up to, huh?”

Winston's ears twitched upward, listening, and he cocked his head at Will. For several seconds, Will held his breath. Then in a flash, the dog rose and rushed into Will's arms, wuffling lowly as he licked at Will's mouth and face.

"There you are," Will said, and laughed through the sloppy kisses. "There you are." He lost himself to running his fingers through Winston's smooth fur for some minutes, and hardly noticed how much time had passed until Hannibal appeared at the opposite end of the dining room.

Hannibal was dressed more casually than Will had ever witnessed. It was a disarming sight; that of Hannibal with the sleeves of his buttoned shirt rolled to his elbows, untempered affection making itself known in the softened features of his relaxed face. Hannibal said nothing for a long moment, until Winston's ears flicked to attention and both Will and the dog turned to regard him. "Dinner is served," Hannibal announced.

Their meal was a decadent, syrupy broth garnished with fresh vegetables, and lamb which Hannibal had prepared that morning. So lost was Will in the room, and the sensation of Hannibal's eyes on him as he picked up his spoon, that Will forgot why he had gone so long without. His stomach grumbled unhappily, and before Will had chance to overthink it, he had gathered a spoonful to his waiting lips.

It tasted delicious. More than; thick and seeping, warming Will from the inside out as it slipped down his throat. He sent Hannibal a grateful smile across the table, where Hannibal was sat watching keenly from the setting opposite, mouth parted in wait. "Thank you," Will said, and meant it with all he had.

Hannibal's expression did not change—quietly unreadable, and waiting. "You haven't yet tried the lamb," he admonished. A curious twitch undid the thin line of his lips. "Tell me after."

Will returned his gaze to the plate between his hands, next to the bowl of broth. Lamb, left to simmer to a mouth-watering pinkish grey. Will had never had lamb before—he wondered, at how it would taste. Perhaps not so dissimilar to veal? He raised his head once more to look at Hannibal. "What part?" he asked, curious and unreasonably eager, despite himself. Will had never felt so hungry, his stomach so empty.

Hannibal's lips curled, not quite a smile, but conciliatory all the same. The maroon in his eyes shifted subtly in the dancing candlelight. "Heart. Half for you," he intoned, and tilted his head downward to his own plate. "Half for me."

The first bite was not bitter. Rather, it was sublimely sweet, and left only the faintest of tart aftertastes behind on his tongue. Will savored it as he chewed, and only swallowed once all the sweetness had divested itself of the meat.

Again, Will nodded. His smile was more tentative, shy, and directed largely to his plate. "I like it," he said. When he chanced a glance upward, he caught glimpse of the whites of Hannibal's teeth. Practically beaming, for barely a moment, before the grin disappeared and Hannibal began to eat, as well.

Hannibal had sharp, crooked canines, Will saw. It was endearing.

After dinner, Will curled up in one of the armchairs with Winston at his feet, and observed drowsily as Hannibal opened the balcony doors. Hannibal procured from somewhere the same sketchbook that Will remembered seeing the first time at the Uffizi gallery, then he propped himself up on the balcony ledge and began sketching what appeared to be the outline of the rooftops against the hazy, pre-dawn sky. For a while, Will closed his eyes, and listened to the susurration of the pages as Hannibal flipped through them.

“I want to be able to draw these streets from memory,” Hannibal said, a break in their contemplations. Will cracked an eye open, and was immediately captivated by the practiced, lulling motion of Hannibal’s pencil. “I want to be able to draw the Palazzo Vecchio and the Duomo.”

“You don’t know if you’ll see it again,” Will answered, a perfect mimicry of what Hannibal had once said to him, what seemed to be so long ago now.

Hannibal paused in his sketching, and if it weren’t for the wavering light at the edges of the rooftops, Will would not have seen the minute tick in Hannibal’s throat. A swallow.

“I have an uncle and an aunt awaiting me in Paris. They have given me a great gift, one that has allowed me my return to society, and a successful life. I came to Florence to learn what that meant. To know how I wanted it, and the shape I will take when I become a man. Florence... is but a beginning. My beginning.”

“You’re leaving?” Will was proud that his voice did not waver.

“Not for another two weeks, at least. My aunt insists sooner, but I will not have my departure be premature.” He fell quiet, a moment. Then his eyes jumped up to meet Will’s across the scant space. They moved up and down Will’s exhaustion-softened features, and lingered as though drinking in the sight. “For a time, my memories of Florence will be all I have.”

At Will’s feet, Winston whined into the cradle of his paws. Before the words could choke themselves in Will’s throat, and clot there, he managed a shaky, desperate, “Hannibal...”

He did not know what he was asking for; he only knew he would miss Hannibal terribly without evening having the chance to know him. Would Will see him, by chance, again in Paris? Where the people were noisy, and plenty, and the city far-reaching?

Hannibal stared down at the page of his sketchbook, and said nothing. A myriad of complexities came and went across his face, and Will struggled to catch them all.

When next Hannibal spoke, an undercurrent of hesitation had found its way inside. The sort of vulnerability Will had never thought he would ever hear, coming from Hannibal.

“There’s something I had hoped to show you. Something I had wondered—” There Hannibal stopped, eyes flickering as he searched for the right words.

“What is it?” Will asked, slow and with a slight, tenuous quiver of doubt hidden beneath.

“If you would allow me the pleasure of surprising you?”

Chapter 8

They left before the sun had yet risen above the Florence rooftops. The parking area and the street beyond Hannibal's apartment were quiet for so early. The local storefronts, with their antique plaques and weathered letterings, were all shuttered and dark. When Will followed Hannibal out onto the front steps and down the lane of parked motorcycles, he lifted his chin to blink sleepily at the banked clouds overhead. They spread outward, a haze of grey that sunk down to blanket the empty street.

"Where are we going?" Will asked, as Hannibal retook his seat on the black motorcycle and shrugged on his leather jacket. A small slip of a smirk settled on Hannibal's face, and he met Will's eyes as he pulled on his gloves with short, perfunctory movements.

"Palermo," Hannibal replied simply, and offered the helmet to Will once more.

But Palermo was far—and Will was underdressed for so cool a morning. He hadn't a coat, either; not after leaving Hannibal's suit jacket behind on the armchair in the living room. Will had thought about taking it again, but had second-guessed himself, his eyes finding it through the open doorway of the dining room throughout their dinner, and then when Will had curled against it to drowse while Hannibal sketched. That was hardly half an hour ago.

As they were leaving the apartment, Will had looked to the armchair, and had very nearly made up his mind. Then he had turned to find Hannibal studying him from the doorway, the expression on Hannibal's face curiously vacant and lacking of any judgement.

Will left the jacket.

"You have not had much cause to see the sights of Florence," Hannibal said, and indicated the seat in front of him with an incline of his head. Will obeyed somewhat grumpily, hoisting himself over the cushion and gripping his hands to the front lip, to which Hannibal only smiled again. "I imagine you have likewise been bereft of Italy's greatest achievements," he continued.

Hannibal spoke now into Will's shoulder, far enough that they did not touch, but that Hannibal's warm breath could still be felt there, a ghost of pressure against the thin material of Will's t-shirt. Beneath the helmet's visor, Will's face warmed just the same. He flicked his head to the side, and the heavy helmet along with it. "We get to ride a train?" Will hesitated to ask, a flicker of childish excitement kindling in his chest. A train ride to Palermo, with *Hannibal*. Would that mean they would see the ocean?

Will did not like to lend credence to hope. He had been through too much, and hoped too long all through it, to retain that desire. But a part of him wanted to. He lost himself momentarily to that room in his mind where he could hear the distant spray of waves—it had been an achingly long time since Will had opened it. Even now, he imagined himself pressed against the wood, eyes closed in listening. He wondered if having Hannibal with him would be like it was with everything else; soothing, and a balm to Will's usual nerves.

Behind him, Hannibal had fallen silent. Will only noticed several moments later, after their conversation abruptly quieted. It was the kind of silence Will attributed only to him, unique in so much as Hannibal's entire body stilled, controlled to the detail, and remained motionless even in breathing. Will did not slouch back against Hannibal upon the motorcycle's curved seat, but the places where his back touched Hannibal's front were inescapable. And Hannibal was not breathing.

Though Will attempted to turn his head, he was hindered by the cumbersome helmet and their positioning. "Hannibal?" he began, uncertain.

It was much easier to see beyond the darkened visor now than it had been during the night. Despite the dimness of the morning, the lanterns along the sidewalk were still lit, and Will noted the animal-like tilt of Hannibal's head and straightened spine. Intent, listening. Hannibal stared off down the street until a pigeon cooed and took off from the ledge above the front steps, and the concentrated weight in his darkened eyes suddenly lifted.

"It is nothing," Hannibal murmured, a flash of his crooked teeth in the corner of Will's eye. "There is a bakery on this street I frequent in the mornings. Their dough has a distinctive aroma, and it would be remiss of me to pass on the chance to enjoy it, if for but a moment."

Will shifted forward on the seat. Though Hannibal would not see it beneath the visor, Will scrunched his nose up to fight off a fit of surprised laughter. If the bakery was indeed open, Will would not have had the faintest clue; he noticed no such scent in the air. Hannibal was *strange*. "You smell everything, don't you?" he asked in a joking lilt.

For Will remembered the first time he had seen Hannibal grow still in such a way—the second day in the gallery, when Hannibal had said Will smelled like *apples*. And then later, in the garden; Hannibal had known Winston was there without even needing to be told.

"I have the nose for it," Hannibal allowed. The odd, blank mask that had been on his face moments before gave way to something softer, genuine. "And we are going to be late for our train."

It was warmer just after dawn than it had been out on the Ponte Santa Trìnita during the night. Too much rain, light as it may have been, allowed for a thick, ambient humidity about the air. As Hannibal started the motorcycle and pulled out into the street, Will's steady intake of breath fogged the glass beneath the helmet visor. Caught beneath, the curls of hair which fell across his forehead grew damp and slick against his skin, and only curled further with sweat.

Today was a Saturday. Will did not have to suffer tutoring on the weekends, but he was still required to attend meals under the careful eye of the staff. That was, until the maids discovered his bed once again empty. If Will were to do this, if he were to leave Florence, with Hannibal—even for just the morning and afternoon—there would be no going back from it. Signor Doemling would find out in a matter of hours, when Madame La Falce's staff shifted for the morning. Of that, Will was certain. What he was less certain of was whether he should be leaving with Hannibal at all; this was no simple visit to the gallery. If Will was gone long enough, the Polizia could become involved.

Inspector Pazzi had saved Will the indecency of the truth, and had lied for him. But there were no more second chances now. Will was desperate enough to grasp for what time he could spend with Hannibal, that he did not think about the consequences.

Just this would be enough.

More than that, though, Will had an inkling of certainty that Signor Doemling would not turn to the Polizia to report him missing. When in the company of his mother's staff, Will had always been so careful to act like the obedient little boy his mother wanted him to be. He was dutiful in his studies, cautious in his exploring of the garden, and ever so polite when addressing the maids or cooks. Signor Doemling was the head of staff, and had sons of his own. Will knew from his study of Signor Doemling that he did not entirely fall for Will's boyish ruse. He had always watched Will with a peculiar sort of look, as though he were trying to figure out what it was about Will that was off. Will suspected that a man who had raised sons could tell the difference between the real thing, and a boy who hid behind beatific smiles and doleful, childish eyes to appear normal.

No, Signor Doemling would know that Will had willingly run off, and that Will would return on his own given time.

Nevertheless, it was almost surreal to find the motorcycle shifting gears and banking right to turn down a familiar passage through the district. As they weaved through the idle buzz of cars—drivers on their way to work, most likely—Will found himself leaning into the motorcycle's slanting movements. Hannibal's chin rested just above the helmet, and those deceivingly strong arms stretched around Will's shoulders. Blocking Will from the wind which picked up as they moved, even at so low a speed in the narrow street.

Will kept careful control of the space between their bodies. He did not allow himself to slide back into Hannibal's stomach like he had the night before; though even so, he could not resist pressing slightly into the warmth of Hannibal's chest at his back. It made Will feel safer, somehow.

More surreal, however, was how close Hannibal's apartment was from Will's own home. Ten minutes, perhaps, though it might have been longer; Will was too distracted by the contrasting chill of the wind at his front with that of Hannibal's warmth behind him to keep track. Will did not have to guess why Hannibal took him home—he had seen enough of the long looks Hannibal gave his sparse clothing when Hannibal thought Will wasn't paying attention. Though it was only as the motorcycle rumbled to a stop before the gated alley that led into the courtyard garden that Will realized the truth of those looks. Hannibal was *concerned* for Will. He cared about Will's wellbeing, and that alone left Will feeling a tingle of kindred affection in his chest.

"I presume you can be inconspicuous," Hannibal murmured, once the engine cut off and had quieted into nothing. He dropped one of his hands from the handle and pulled back so Will could slip down from the seat. Once Will had done so, and turned to meet Hannibal's eyes for the first time since leaving the apartment, he found only an almost fond regard awaiting him there. "I believe a change of clothes is in order. These are quite light for the weather, don't you think?"

Hannibal did not indicate Will's pajamas, necessarily, but he didn't need to. Will was already turning once more to slip through the alley, quick on his feet as he jiggled the lock free of the gate and crouched along the shadowed side of the garden. He climbed the ivy beneath his bedroom balcony and hastily dug a clean pair of clothes from his dresser. Most of these were of the selection chosen by his mother, save for Will's night shirts, and for that reason he spent several minutes debating which of them to wear. In the end, he opted for a basic, buttoned shirt and one of his lighter jackets. It was a deep navy-blue with soft, silky lining on the inside, and Will could not bring himself to despise it like he did the others.

For the briefest of moments, he caught sight of *The Garden Wall* sitting on the edge of his dresser, by the mirror. The thought crossed his mind then; more of an impulse, really—to bring it along, or leave it behind. Though in the end, like Hannibal's suit jacket, Will could not justify an impulse born of want and selfishness alone. What would he do with the book, anyway? Read it with Hannibal on the train?

He shook the image away as quickly as it had come. Now was not the time.

There was little, still, for him to regret when he and Hannibal were entering a private train cabin under an hour later. Will was nearly trembling with energy, excited and eager both. A trip to Palermo was as much a surprise as any—he could hardly imagine what Hannibal wanted to show him there.

The train station was thinly crowded considering the early hour, and despite Will's paranoia, no one paid attention to him and Hannibal as they waited in line to board. The stonework of the station was old, and the train seemingly moreso, a dusted black shape which shone a dull grey in the light. The cabin Hannibal had procured for them was toward the front; Will attributed this to the lack of many other passengers. There were tourists, of course, but they mostly kept to themselves, either speaking quietly or sleeping in the aisle seats.

Their cabin was small, but big enough to house a cushioned bench on each wall. Will took the far seat on the left, up against the window, where he could press the side of his face to the cold glass and peer out at the people milling about the platform.

The women of Florence tended to dress in the highest of fashions; though the spring had been warm for the most part, many of them stood in monotone shades of designer coats, bundled up against the coolness of the foggy morning. For a while, Will watched them, and counted the number of children present among the scattered adults. Very few, given the size of the crowd, but those that were there hung from their parents' arms, or noisily chased other children around the beams which supported the station arches.

Hannibal was a quiet person to begin with—Will could not recall a time when he wasn't, as peculiar as Hannibal was—but now, Will found himself encased in the cabin's silence, straining to hear the shouts of the children in the distance through the glass. He wondered at their naivety, and the easiness of their laughter. Thoughtless, not plagued with the careful constructions that marked Will's own. So taken was he with their frenetic movements, he did not at first notice the sounds of the train beginning to move until the wheels stuttered to a start, and the platform slid away before his lidded, unfocused eyes.

It was not their loss which eventually caused Will to look away from the window, nor was it Hannibal. Pressed tightly to the glass, and with his legs tucked up underneath himself, it was not long before the position grew uncomfortable and aching. So too did Will's chest ache in remembrance. Truly, he was grateful for Hannibal's presence—how easy it was, to forget about the faces of Il Mostro's victims when they were together. That, in turn, created a flare of guilt in the back of Will's mind. Inspector Pazzi had come to *him*, after all.

Did that not mean Will should be trying his best to unspool the meaning of their deaths?

Did that not mean Will was the only one capable of doing so?

The guilt burned coldly there, reminding Will of his own selfishness once more. He didn't want to think about the recreations. He didn't want to see the gaping mouths of Chloris and Zephryus, didn't want to bear witness to Antonella's angered jealousy, or feel intimately the spiraling hurt captured forever in Paola's listless eyes. He didn't want to know them, and see them dying beneath his hands as if he himself had killed them—not anymore.

The Florence rooftops disappeared before long, and were replaced with the low hills and sparse houses which stretched beyond the city limits. The train entered abruptly into a tunnel, and at once, the window was filled with black. Will saw the rippling red folds of Antonella's drapery there, flickering and jumping in the darkness which rushed past beyond the window. He smelt trees and damp; an undercurrent of sharply fragrant foxglove, thickening like phlegm where the back of his tongue met his throat.

Finally, Will's eyes shuttered. His exhaustion fell back over him, and he rubbed weakly at his face as he turned inward to face the rest of the cabin. Hannibal, for once, had diverted his attention elsewhere rather than on Will. There was a sketchbook set out across Hannibal's lap where he sat on the bench opposite—a different one, Will noted, than used on previous occasions. Though Hannibal was not currently sketching, he was staring, impassive and unblinking, down at the unfilled page. And in Will's estimation, clearly perplexed by it.

"Can't think of what to draw?" Will asked into the quiet, nearly a whisper for how low he spoke. His throat felt as though it had been rubbed raw, and he hated it. Hated the feeling of wrongness here, in a place where he had only hoped for an escape.

For his part, Hannibal did not appear startled by Will's question. However, a tick of motion in the corner of Hannibal's pursed lips gave him away. He blinked slowly, brushed imaginary dust from the top corner of the page with a thumb. "No," Hannibal said, strangely subdued. "Only preoccupied with other thoughts, I'm afraid."

That made two of them. It struck Will again, how conversely similar both he and Hannibal were to each other. Will knew precious little about Hannibal's background, except for the knowledge that he was a student, and had an aunt and uncle in Paris. No mention of parents, or any other family of note.

Will saw loss in Hannibal, in his scrutinized trappings and steadfast control, his eccentricities and the palpable facets of himself which Will sensed that he withheld. But, perhaps, loss was what Hannibal saw in Will, just the same.

They fell back into one of the many silences so characteristic of their shared time and space. An attendant knocked briefly on the cabin door, at one point, to offer water and blankets. The blanket Will accepted before spreading out across the short bench. Overlarge, there was just enough material to bunch into a pillow while also covering his legs. Knees bent slightly to fit all of himself on the bench, Will curled over on his side and propped his head against the window, studying Hannibal as he, too, studied the untouched paper.

Though it pained Will to even get past the thick, burning guilt hidden away in his chest, he considered the question that he had been meaning to ask since Montespertoli, and since the gala.

"Before," Will said at length, idly running his cheek down a soft patch of blanket, "You said the victims were chosen. That their transformation made them beautiful to him." He swallowed, parted his dry lips on a shaky exhale. "The Monster." His voice grew nearly too thick to finish. "Do you still think that now?"

Hannibal straightened subtly in his seat. No movement was too small for Hannibal, and even this was purposeful. "You are referring to the last murders," he said, not quite airily, but with some distance in his tone. Those dark eyes flicked over and down to Will; they reminded Will of how Hannibal had watched him from across the ballroom. Indecipherable, but probing in their intent. "Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*."

Will could not stop his eyes from going wide, and his mouth falling open against the blanket, just as his fingers tightened in the folds hidden beneath. Startled, he could only stare at Hannibal, suddenly and swiftly numb.

"Does it surprise you that I recognized the piece?" Hannibal continued, a contrary quirk in his mouth. He dropped his eyes to his open sketchbook and ran his hand down the spine, seeming to taste his next words as they came to him, the tip of his tongue peeking out to swipe along his inner lip, corner to corner. A look of cool contemplation fell across his face then; that, and a remarkable certainty. "Quite a nasty story I've been reading about in the papers. One sister killing the child of the other, and for what I can only assume was a pitiable and one-sided love. That is how these tales tend to end."

Will's eyes became glassy, unresponsive, and all his conscious thought gave way to Paola's wavering visage in his mind. Pale as snow, and with a bottomless, broken hurt etched into her slack and deadened features. Though his eyes began to burn, the tears would never come. "She didn't say anything," Will said, voice small, and moved to wrap his arms around his stomach under the blanket. "She just took what she thought it was her right to take. As if her sister were hers alone, as if I was—" He sucked in a breath, returning to himself in a jolt that had him squeezing his eyes tightly shut.

The cabin was never truly quiet; for the train creaked and rolled underfoot, a tumbling white noise which pervaded the enclosed space and was the only thing that managed to remind Will starkly of where he was—pulling him away from the twofold, grasping hands of Il Mostro's *Sacred and Profane Love*, of Paola and Antonella, and back to full awareness.

Beyond the window, the train emerged upon a brightly lit cliffside. In the distance, the ocean was a steady and grounding sight. Will recalled his dad on a sailboat in Michigan. He

remembered the long drive up from Tavernier, and the sensation of the scratchy backseat fabric against his face, a soothing cadence which spoke of *Roman Rooms*. Will did not know if he could lock Il Mostro away like he had once locked away Hannah—how could he, when he didn't even know if he wanted to?

Across from him, Hannibal tsked lowly, a soft hiss of air nearly indistinguishable from the repetitive, whistling clack of the train on its tracks.

"What do you see, Will?"

When Will opened his eyes, only a cut of light reached through the cabin window and fell across his face. He didn't see Hannibal's reflection in the glass. He saw his feathered monster. He saw the wendigo, rising up behind the sweaty, messed curls of Will's head to create a webbing, antlered centerpiece; one which stuttered and spread outward from his crown like the veined roots of a fungus. Black as night, and black as the rose petals burned so sweetly into his memory from the gala.

"I see Zephyrus," Will spoke softly. The vision percolated and condensed. Il Mostro's Zephyrus, bloated and blue, choking audibly on the water that dribbled from his quivering lips.

"You see his face when you close your eyes," said Hannibal's voice from the dead man's mouth.

Struggling for the strength to move, Will could only jerk his head in a nod.

Then at once, the vision dissipated into nothing, and Will was left short of breath in the shadowed cabin. His eyes met with Hannibal's in the reflection of the window, distorted by the way the light hit it—or perhaps something else. For Hannibal's eyes appeared as twin spots of black through the meager sunlight. Entirely too taken with Will's tired, curled body in the corner of the bench.

Will would not recognize it for what it was: hunger.

Your eyes, Will did not say. He lasted for mere seconds before he had to drop his eyes down and away again, instinctual under Hannibal's particular and weighted attention. Another tingling sensation came alive on Will's skin. Not dissimilar to what he was used to feeling under Hannibal's consuming focus.

"You should get some rest," Hannibal remarked, bereft of any discernable emotion, but curiously, deeply throaty. "We will be in Palermo in just a few hours."

Will did not think he had it in him to sleep. But before long, the monotonous clacking of the train sent him tumbling down into unconsciousness. As he began to slip away in the comforting warmth of the cabin, never once did the heady weight of Hannibal's dark eyes leave him.

Palermo was not a city that Will could easily ascribe description to. Appearingly more modern than Florence in some respects, the yellow faces of its tall, cluttered buildings could almost have been mistaken for those found along the Arno. More cars crowded the streets here, and more tourists bustled about the fresh markets which spilled out into the smaller squares and claustrophobic passageways.

When he and Hannibal left the train behind, Hannibal walked him through one of these outdoor markets, pointing out the stalls bearing fresh seafood and herbs, local produce by the basketful—golden pumpkins and bright yellow squash, pineapples and many-hued oranges of delectable size. One such orange Hannibal bought for Will without a word, only a spreading smile which lit up Hannibal's eyes with pleasure. As they left the market and noisy crowd behind them, Will kept his eyes averted from those who passed him by, and was more than happy to pick at his orange as they walked, humming at the savory sweetness which disintegrated between his teeth.

Perhaps the most surprising of all was where Hannibal took him after—but then again, it was the very thing Hannibal had wanted to show Will in Palermo.

The Cappella Palatina, the royal chapel, sat beneath the upper floors of the Palazzo Reale—a palace of old which had once been home to the Norman kings of Sicily. Hannibal did not reveal it as their destination until he had rented another motorcycle to drive to the other side of the city. Once again Will sat forward in the space provided by Hannibal's chest, and once more Hannibal displayed a fluid prowess of the cobbled streets as they weaved through the traffic-heavy lanes. Though soon the Norman palace came into view—a dappled, sunlit brown which painted a more austere and noble presentation than most other buildings stood throughout Palermo.

Palm trees lined one side of the street, as did the cars of tourists. Hannibal parked up against the tall iron gate which bordered the cracked, aging street. Will immediately leaned back on the seat, his helmet knocking gently against the bottom of Hannibal's as he stared up through the visor at the Palace. It was elevated above the street, the brickwork that supported it dark and weathered, scattered with moss.

Hannibal said nothing as he helped Will down from the motorcycle, nor as he weaved effortlessly through the crowd of tourists moving into the chapel. They parted for him, and Will by extent, without needing to be asked, as though Hannibal were a presence rather than mere person. All the while, Will found himself lost to the sounds and sights: the back of Hannibal's leather jacket and helmet-tousled, ashen hair as he led Will inside, and then the blending echo which could be heard bouncing around the chapel's vast interior—a conglomeration of languages spoken all at once as travelers shuffled about the grand floors.

Focusing on Hannibal's backside kept the anxiety Will felt among such a loud crowd from overwhelming his senses. He swayed closer to Hannibal, and tried to remain so as he gazed up at the towering apse of the chapel—the Jesus Pantocrator mosaic a work of rapture above the highest arch—and became instantly mesmerized with the murals which brought the ceilings to life. All were gilded in gold and intricate lattice, depictions of saints and apostles, scenes from the betrayal and the ascension, and others that Will recalled fuzzily from what he knew of the bible.

Toward the front steps and altar, the byzantine mosaics of Jesus, accompanied on each side by that of Saint Paul and Saint Andrew, seemed to stare down at Will with unfettered focus. As though the exquisite artistry of their creation allowed them to reach into Will's mind, *see*, and pluck the very thoughts he hated most from his head. Cautiously, Will took a step back, and was unprepared to be met with the soft give of Hannibal's stomach. A weight fell upon Will's shoulder—Hannibal's gloved hand. The touch settled him.

"Alright?" Hannibal murmured, a sort of reverence in his tone which suggested it was for the chapel, not for Will's benefit, or out of pity.

Nevertheless, Will's face flushed with heat and he ducked his head downward. His embarrassment, hot like coals in the pit of his stomach, burned away into ash at the sight he was met with there. A skeleton, inlaid inside a decrepit, cracking circle in the center of the floor. What might have been confused for a pose of devotion, fine-boned hands folded forward as if in prayer, was immediately recognizable as something quite different. The skeleton, Will mused, leant back as though courting its intended audience rather than pleading to them, its head directed away from its folded hands in flirtatious repose.

Hannibal moved away again. Without the warmth of his body close at hand, Will could only follow after. They sat together in a pew not far from the steps, where Will dared not to breathe for quite some time, lest he interrupt the fervent, mumbled prayers of those who knelt nearby. Perhaps sensing the departure in Will's mood—muted now in the face of the Norman Chapel's murky, subdued green and yellow lighting—Hannibal did not attempt to speak either. That was, until Will left off his studious tracing of the murals and turned toward Hannibal beside him.

Hannibal's eyes lay closed, his head tilted back as though he were drinking in the chapel with all his senses, mouth parted in delicate scenting of the air. Though Will could not be certain, he thought he may have imagined the barest hint of glistening shadow in the ducts of Hannibal's eyes—tears which would never come to fall.

"I spent many years of my youth convinced I had lost the ability to feel a great many things," Hannibal spoke. "It was my uncle's wife, Lady Murasaki, who noticed the fear that had followed me to their home in Paris. I did not trust her judgement until she first sent me to Palermo, and I saw the Norman Chapel for the first time."

Will tried not to stare. Confusion mixed with concern no doubt made itself immediately apparent on his own face. "You thought yourself... emotionless."

"Insensate," Hannibal amended, his lashes flickering over his cheeks as he opened his eyes to the room once more. Dark, they danced round the dips in the arches of the ceiling. "I feared I would never love again."

When Will followed Hannibal's gaze, he was stunned by the sight of a mural which depicted several winged cherubs against a backdrop of voluminous clouds, tucked away behind one of the pillars. Dread took the place of the calm that had so easily settled over Will within the chapel; memory of Paola Migliorini's newborn child came unbidden to his mind. Playful, and so terribly unaware as her fat, infant arms sunk into the muddied water of a bottomless well.

“All of us possess the ability to see a beautiful thing and know with certainty that we love it. You. Myself.” A wry upturn twisted Hannibal’s mouth. “Even your monster, Will.”

“Antonella did not love the way the monster thought she should,” Will stated. He had known from the beginning, of course. The monster chose his victims to transform them; a beginning and an end.

Hannibal gave a slow, lingering nod of approval. “And he transformed her into Venus for it. The goddess whose sole purpose is to represent that love. Many Italian artists sought also to depict Venus over the last centuries. Caravaggio, Titian,” there Hannibal paused, “Botticelli.”

For a moment, the air stalled in Will's lungs, and the whispers of those knelt in prayer around them faded into nothing. A single recollected voice rose above them: Will’s art tutor, Bernard, speaking of Botticelli’s famous works the same spring that he had shown Will the black and white photograph of the *Primavera*.

“*The Birth of Venus*,” he breathed.

Beside him, Hannibal graced Will with a glimpse of grinning teeth, the skin around his eyes crinkling with pleased happiness. “Cunning boy,” Hannibal leant close to murmur, a breath from Will’s curls.

But Will’s mind had already stuttered to a stop. Would Il Mostro recreate the work of the same artist twice?

“There is something else I wanted to show you, here,” Hannibal continued, perhaps not seeing the turmoil masked beneath Will’s slackened expression. If Will had been paying attention, he would have noticed the minute fidgeting of Hannibal’s clasped hands. “The surprise is more than the Norman chapel—it is also what lies beneath it. I did not think you were ready, before, but now...” Hannibal trailed off, the sharp features of his face growing distant, for once uncharacteristically uncertain.

Then abruptly, he stood, and imparted upon Will an unguarded smile. “Wait here,” Hannibal instructed. “I will only be a moment.”

At a loss for words, Will could only nod his assent. He did not have to wait long, however; only five minutes later, Will heard footsteps approach from behind him. “Hannibal?” Will began, and pivoted round on the pew.

But it was not Hannibal standing in the aisle of the Norman Chapel, a handful of feet from Will’s seat.

It was Inspector Pazzi, and the expression on the man’s face was alert as Will had ever seen it.

“Will,” Pazzi said. “I need to speak with you immediately.”

Chapter 9

Inspector Pazzi was the very last person Will could have imagined stood among the tourists and prayerful attendants of the Norman Chapel. Hardly a very religious man, and one disinclined to whimsy—only hard and unforgiving fact—the contrast was unnatural. Stood here now, backlit by the glow of the candles along the aisle and the diffuse greenish shadow cast by the eaves, Will was arrested by the sight. His hands clenched against his knees, and he swallowed fast on the breathless exclamation that jumped forth on his tongue.

How? Will wondered, mind growing distant and fuzzy, dissociating itself from the situation. How had Pazzi found him here? Dread swelled within him, and as he watched Pazzi approach, he was riddled with disbelief that the man was actually here. Not just a figment, another vision conjured from the turmoil of Will's imagination.

If only reality was so simple.

"Will Graham," Pazzi murmured in greeting. His hands slipped into his trouser pockets as he dipped forward with his next step. Stocky and almost lumbering, he was a man with little care for how he appeared in such a sacred dwelling. If not for the customary suit and tie fitting of his station, Pazzi would have looked wholly misplaced here. "You are a difficult boy to track down."

"I don't understand," Will managed, detached, tone a fragile note which threatened to tremble. He swallowed again, no doubt noticeable to someone as quick a study as Inspector Pazzi, and forced himself to stay sitting rather than stand as he itched to.

Had the Polizia been searching for Will, after all? How then had *Pazzi* been the one to find Will, and so soon after Hannibal had brought Will to Palermo?

A large hand came to rest on the back of the pew where Will sat. Pazzi's cool gaze sought out Will's own.

"You are not in trouble, Will," said Pazzi, in a lowered register which had less to do with the sanctity of the chapel than the slight, out of breath pauses that found homes in the spaces between Pazzi's words. "Do not misunderstand my intentions—only yesterday evening, I found myself in possession of new information pertaining to the case of Florence's monster. You had not contacted me since word of the sisters in Montespertoli broke, you see, and for want of an interview, I ventured to your home. Imagine your mother's surprise when you were not to be found in your bedroom last night."

Pazzi spoke in that paced, steady way of his, however, the man's voice was marked by an undertone of hurried incentive. It was another thing which set him apart in the chapel. Though Pazzi spoke low enough to only be heard by Will's ears, a handful of parishioners and even a priest had glanced Pazzi's way at his arrival. It was not hard to guess what they were thinking—Pazzi was clearly law enforcement, but what was his purpose here?

A shutter fell down over Will's expression. Caught off guard, Will did not have the place of mind to present the mask he often did when faced with adults. That of the confused but smiling boy, constructed to divert elsewhere the kind of attention Will hated most. He settled on indifference, instead.

"You knew I would be here," Will concluded, the accusation leaving his mouth before he could stop it. "How?" He did not allow his voice to break or quiver, straightening his posture in the face of Pazzi's scrutiny. Though he was at once gratified that Pazzi sought his help once more, something did not sit right with the situation. How could Pazzi have known that Will had left Florence?

Above him, Pazzi was not staring down at Will any longer, but toward the front of the chapel, where the alter lay beneath the brilliant, prismed image of the Jesus Pantocrator. He was not admiring the art; flighty, his sharp eyes seemed to jump around the immediate area as though searching for something. Or someone, perhaps. Then he seemed to finally notice the distant glances of the people around them, for he leant closer to Will, pitching his voice lower still.

"Your mother suggested you had run, but I knew better," Pazzi began. It was exactly as he had spoken to Will outside the Uffizi. As though Will were a simple-minded child not yet cultivated, and in need of a compassionate hand. "When I was just a boy, I was much like you, Will. I thought I could run, never made to look back. The furthest I managed on my own was the platform of the Novella station. It was the first place I looked. I happened to see you just as you boarded a train."

For a moment, Will said nothing, and he almost believed Pazzi. But there was a distinct wrongness which had weaved itself into the man's words, and which brought to mind how easily Inspector Pazzi had convinced Signor Doemling of Will's innocence that day after the street, and Winston.

Calmly, Will tilted his chin up so as to meet Pazzi's eyes. He didn't need to look closely to find what he was looking for, there. Then he knew.

Pazzi was lying.

"You came to take me back," Will said.

"I came to talk," Pazzi amended. The urgency of Pazzi's movements put Will's instincts on alert, and he watched as the man's eyes once more skittered up and around the chapel's upper level. "Preferably after you have agreed to return with me, yes. Tell me, Will, did you come here alone?"

His tone was intently urging now. Will could only freeze up, stricken with worry and concern both. If Pazzi had seen Hannibal boarding the train with Will... there were so many ways things could go wrong. Will was a minor—would Pazzi find reason to arrest Hannibal, when Will had agreed to come to Palermo of his own accord? Not that his opinion would really matter, when Pazzi thought him no more than a child that required protecting.

No. Will couldn't—he *wouldn't* allow that to happen to Hannibal. Even if, by all accounts, Pazzi had been nothing but a friend to Will. He could not trust Pazzi's intentions.

“Alone—I came here alone,” Will answered, nearly stumbling in his attempt to correct Pazzi’s assumption. *Let him think I’m a stupid child*, Will thought desperately. *Let him think I came on my own, despite the danger.* “And I’m not going anywhere with you until you tell me why I should.”

When Will stood, he did not have time to react before Pazzi had grabbed him, thick fingers slotting into imagined handholds on Will’s arm. Those which had been created by Monsieur Lefebvre weeks ago, bruises long faded, and yet Will felt had festered like an open wound upon his skin ever since. Even through the thick material of Will’s jacket the touch was scalding. Despite the pity and admonishment slicking the grey of Pazzi’s eyes—cast in shifting, green-hued shadow in the low light of the chapel—Will suppressed the instinct to flinch. He regulated his breathing, and remained coolly, unsettlingly calm.

It had been so long since Hannibal had left. Though Will could not bring himself to glance around the room, much less behind him in the direction Hannibal had gone, he worried that Hannibal would choose this moment to intervene.

But curiously, Hannibal did not come.

Then rather suddenly, Pazzi suffered a sigh, and the grip he had on Will relaxed and fell away.

“You want the truth?” Pazzi said, hushed as he eyed the camera-toting tourists that weaved around them in the aisle. A few had even glared at Pazzi, in passing. “A young woman by the name of Natalina Mauriot went missing from the Santa Maria Nuova hospital several days ago. She is the model type: striking as she is beautiful, according to friends. Admitted for alcohol poisoning one night whilst partying, but never made it home after checking out with their staff the next morning.”

For a time, Will studied Pazzi, askance. What was Pazzi playing at? Grasping one second, outwardly gentle the next. Though now Will knew Pazzi for what he was: a calculated and practiced liar. Will did not rub at his arm where the ghost of Pazzi’s fingers still burned. Instead, he furrowed his brows. “Why Il Mostro?”

This gave Pazzi pause, for his demeanor was abruptly contemplative, and he glanced over his shoulder once more, as though expecting something to jump out at him from the cracking paint of the murals. “I would not have made the connection if it were not for separate accounts of Signora Mauriot’s arrogance. Her presiding nurse described her as combative. Rude to the point of early release from the hospital’s care.” One of Pazzi’s eyebrows knocked up. “You may not trust me, Will, but believe I would not come to you if a woman’s life were not on the line. We must discuss this with immediacy, on the train as I escort you home.”

In the ancient, alluring glow of the chapel’s glass mosaics and warm candlelight, Will felt safe. To even think of leaving left a sensation of emptiness in his gut, seeking desperately once more for completion. Will did not wish to allow Il Mostro to seep back into his mindscape, at least not while he was here. But then he thought of the woman, Natalina, eyes bright and glassy in the compelling dark of Florence streets where neither the light reflected off the Arno nor swelling violins would reach, made to watch as the monster ripped her most precious pieces from her body as she still breathed.

Would she become another Venus for her arrogance?

Will thought of Hannibal, the wonder fixed on his face as he watched Will, sometimes. As if Will were special; someone Hannibal had never dared to dream of meeting and sharing such beautiful things with. He recalled Hannibal's nervousness in bringing him here, the vulnerability and open truth inherent in all of Hannibal's gestures since their dinner and arrival in Palermo, and tightly shut his eyes.

Whatever it was that lay beneath the chapel that Hannibal wished to show him—it would have to wait.

Will only hoped that Hannibal would forgive him.

He turned to Pazzi and procured a tired, watery smile. "Okay."

Leaving Palermo was like waking from a deep dream, the reality outside of which had sharp, tearing teeth and curved claws to match. The city was no longer bright outside the chapel's inner walls, but subdued, and by the time Will and Pazzi had boarded the next train out to Florence so, too, was Will. He had not wanted this day to end like this, but he also could not drag Hannibal any further into Pazzi's investigation, let alone put him at risk for having accompanied Will to Palermo.

Trapped. That was what this felt like, and Will was powerless to fight it.

Although Pazzi made no move to speak throughout the journey to the station, there was a perceivable uneasiness to the way he held himself. Rigid, Pazzi had spread out on one side of their cabin's seated walls—knees open, physically taking up space where Hannibal had done so with aura alone. It was only once the train doors had shut and its mechanized parts began to vibrate beneath the carpet that Pazzi's jumpiness seemed to fade. And without saying a word, he pulled something from the inner pocket of his coat and offered it to Will over the burgeoning gap between their benches.

It was a photograph of Natalina Mauriot. The image was remarkably innocent, for it captured the strong line of her jaw as she leant forward, staring not at the photographer but entranced somewhere upward—studio lights, perhaps? Her color was muted due to the low exposure, as well as being limited in black and white. Though her lips were a wet cut of charcoal, Will could not imagine them as anything but a decadent red. Dark curls formed a halo round the jut of her fine face, and it was there that Will had to cease his study, biting his bottom lip hard enough to promise blood.

Natalina shared more than a passing resemblance to a much younger Alessandra.

Like looking in a mirror, repeated Anthony Dimmond's voice in Will's mind, warmly accented and coaxing.

Was it coincidence? Or was it simply Will's mindscape listing sideways, once more; inverting to the point of paranoia.

Natalina was no Chloris—the insinuation alone sat wrongly in the visions that swirled behind Will's eyes. The garlanded Chloris exposed on the back of a rusted pickup. His mother, a flicker of white in the cascade of dancers at the gala.

Could Natalina, instead, become Il Mostro's second Venus?

In the end, there was not much Will could offer Pazzi that the man did not already think of. With one exception, of course: Will's epiphany in Montespertoli.

"You believe our monster a cannibal," Pazzi concluded, after entirely too long of a pause in their conversation. Will had almost convinced himself against revealing the theory—because that was what it still was; just a theory. More to fact, Will's belly now churned with compounded guilt, not just for Natalina, but also for Hannibal, and the fact that Will had gone with Pazzi without so much as the chance to explain.

While he could not find it in himself to hate Pazzi, Will was momentarily emboldened by an unusual possessiveness, one that made him want to omit mention of his trespass in the woods of Montespertoli, and keep Il Mostro's true nature to himself. Though thankfully, the feeling had bled away as quickly as it had come.

"The missing organs," Will explained softly, curled against the window as he had before. "He's taking something from them. I just thought—" *That Il Mostro would want to carry his artwork with him, always*, he did not say.

"That there was commonality to be found among these trophies the monster takes?" Pazzi guessed. Then, not quite wrongly, "You do have a truly vivid imagination for one so young, Will. Did you form the association from your own experiences, I wonder?"

There was only ever sympathy etched into the words that Pazzi spoke in Will's company. The inspector had guessed correctly, before, that Will was uncomfortable with the expensive, swaddled life that he lived under the La Falce name. But perhaps, in some ways, it was also a benefit.

"I've had lamb heart," Will said only, and pointedly did not look at Pazzi in favor of the scenery passing outside: distant, tiled rooftops hidden amongst the low hills and fields. They drew him, disjointed, from the memory of the dinner spent in Hannibal's apartment far earlier the same morning. A lifetime ago, it felt like, and yet every detail and sensation—the click of Winston's nails on the floorboards, the baited inhale of Hannibal's breath as he waited for Will to taste—poured outward from Will's head in an instant.

Pazzi, for his part, remained deeply contemplative. "Ah," he murmured, more to himself than to Will in the quiet of their small cabin. "That is right. And was Paola Migliorini not the sacrificial little lamb?"

The silence that fell between Pazzi and Will was unlike the ones he shared with Hannibal. Discomforted, Will could only feel outmaneuvered, as though there was something Pazzi knew that Will did not. The weight that lifted from Will's chest now was insignificant. Despondent, he could only think of his mother's forthcoming punishment, and when next he would be able to escape to Hannibal's apartment once more.

“We are looking for a man with medical training. Quite possibly experience with the culinary arts, and now cannibalism,” said Pazzi, carrying the same sort of hunted, uneasy strain in his voice which had been present in the chapel. “And would fortune so favor us, all three.”

The train ride back to Florence was long and endless, for Will remained wide awake with wariness. His mind had turned unwillingly back to thoughts of Il Mostro, the Botticelli and Titian murders, and the darker nature of the killer that called out to Will behind perilously closed eyes. Even the sight of the ocean outside the cabin window could not stir him from the sickness which seized him.

Pazzi took notice, of course, and treated Will kindly, attempting to alleviate Will’s unease with his joking manner. But Will could not find it in him to laugh, or so much as muster the smile that Pazzi expected. Exhausted but unable to sleep, Will gave careful imagination to playing with Winston in his dad’s front yard, kicking up the autumn leaves blanketing the tall grass. And when that failed to keep his nightmarish, feathered monster from stalking the corners of his vision, he turned instead to Hannibal’s crooked-toothed smile dressed in orange-gold light. *Clever boy.*

The night found Will far more unkindly: uncomfortable and hot, and seated at the far end of his mother’s dining table, where he remained little more than a pretty ornament as he sweated through his fitted tuxedo.

As with all things hand-picked by Alessandra’s good tastes, the furniture which decorated the spacious room matched that of the rest of the house; rich and largely rococo in style, white marbled floors and finishes for fixings held together by bronze and polished brass. The lighting, too, was a cold, inescapable white. Impersonal, just as the handful of guests in attendance at her table. They spoke of the university, the arts, and an upcoming fashion show to be seen to in the coming week, laughing daintily through their teeth over white wine.

Pazzi had told the truth regarding his intentions, at least, for he had truly only sought Will out for insight into Il Mostro. When he had returned Will to the house, and to Alessandra, it had become quickly and abundantly clear that Pazzi had only done so as to make it easier on Will —for it looked far better to be brought back by an inspector who could reason with his mother, than to have come back on his own.

It helped, also, that Inspector Pazzi was able to lie for him once more. Will’s visit to Palermo became a short escape to the Uffizi, after which he had gotten lost on the way home—tame, in comparison. And thus Alessandra had simpered and hummed, and gushed over how poor a boy Will was, to have been lost out on his own. That did not save Will the punishment of attending the dinner party she was hosting that very night; fortunate, how easily she got over her son’s disappearance, and just in time for an evening of flirtatious socializing.

Despite the exhaustion that came over Will as the afternoon dipped into night, he was to be present and presentable, as well as entirely courteous with Alessandra’s guests. Will would behave tonight, say nothing beyond responses to what was asked of him, or be sent promptly to bed without dinner. This was recounted to Will not by his mother, but by Signor Doemling over the shoulder of the maid who dressed Will in his dinner finery; the maid was neutral and said nothing, but the butler, for once, had watched Will closely for a reaction.

Inside, the framework of Will's mental hallways shook with the barely-suppressed instinct to rend with his hands. Outward, however, his fingers twitched where they hung limp at his sides as the maid finished buttoning his jacket. Already his clothing was stifling, and already he wanted to tear it away and run.

But with Signor Doemling stood there, waiting, Will did nothing of the sort.

Alessandra may not have questioned the lie, but there was still the possibility Signor Doemling found it odd. Will knew what he saw when he looked at Signor Doemling, but did the butler know what he was seeing when he looked back?

These were the questions that bothered Will as the night wore on, tireless. As the guests talked round the wide table, the courses were carried out by the waitstaff under Signor Doemling's watchful gaze. The waitstaff attended to Alessandra at the opposite end of the table, and to the others, while the butler himself brought Will each dish. All the while, Will kept careful control of where his eyes wandered, avoiding Signor Doemling's face so as to smile, cherub-like and fleeting, at the guests seated closest to him.

They were a wife and husband in their late 50s, facing each other opposite, just as the other couples in attendance. The wife wore pearls while the husband wore expensive cufflinks, ones that he fiddled with almost constantly beneath the table. When Will caught the man's eye, he saw timidity there, and shame. The husband had cheated on his wife and suspected that she knew. Then Will had studied the wife, in turn, and saw only nerves in her glistening pale eyes—*why has he been avoiding me? Why now, did he decide to come with me tonight?*

Will grew weary of their silent, heated glances soon after the second course had been brought out. Consommé Olga, an extravagant but ultimately tasteless red soup; he spent more time swirling his finely curved silverware against the rim of the bowl than he did bringing it to his mouth. His exhaustion softened his vision but made the tide of voices all the more loud for it, and on top of that now was the husband's anxiety and the wife's nervous tick of plucking at her silk napkin—both of which, in his current state, Will could not help but absorb like a sponge.

Reprieve found him not in the form of the dinner's culmination, but Alessandra's teasing, blasé conversation as the night went on, words which soon held the attention of the entire table. Someone had asked after the tutors in her employ—a change in subject which prompted the woman seated to Alessandra's right to compliment *your darling son's positively polite manner*.

"Will has been learning Italian quite well under Monsieur Lefebvre the last several weeks. I cannot recommend him enough," Alessandra remarked, a cool and decorous smile playing about her full, painted lips. She looked as Natalina Mauriot had in the photograph—a belying innocence, for she did not know of the claws which Monsieur Lefebvre so cunningly hid, and hid well; as well as the ease and purring pleasure she took in the attention of her guests. If Will let himself slip further enough down into his tired mind, he could see Natalina sat at the opposite head of table in Alessandra's place, chin raised to greet the studio lights and flickering flash of cameras.

The guilt which rekindled in Will's gut burned, and ached soundly.

It was only as one of the final courses—the Pâté de Foie Grass, oily and succulent under the chandelier's reflective light—was prepared and brought out into the dining room that Will noticed something was wrong. His own plate was not laid down upon his setting until nearly five minutes after the rest of the guests had been served, and only then by a frazzled maid who placed it before him before hurrying off again. Signor Doemling was not to be found.

With Alessandra distracted, Will took this as the chance he could to wander off—to sake not just his curiosity but also his confusion. He slid out from his seat the moment his mother's head had turned to regard the woman seated beside her, sufficiently out of her direct line of sight, and rattled off a diligent excuse of needing the restroom to the husband and wife. He did not have to go far; halfway down the dining room, he slipped through the grandiose wooden doors and into the dimly lit hallway that lay behind them.

When Will rounded the corner toward the kitchens, he had to stop, stilled in his steps, at the sight of the butler leant against one of the many marble-topped display tables that decorated the halls here. The lamp had been flicked on, pulling forth the weary, haggard lines of Signor Doemling's countenance. The noise that filled the hallway then was abrupt and cutting. Wet, as the butler coughed into the embroidered handkerchief which had always been a staple of his uniform.

The coughing went on for at least a full minute, after which Signor Doemling seemed to come back to himself once more, and straightened from where he must have doubled over to clutch at the table. In the unfavorable lighting, the butler appeared far older than Will had initially assumed, his short hair greyer than last Will remembered, and now licked slickly with perspiration.

It was the cancer, Will knew, that was to blame. And the very reason Signor Doemling had not been present moments before. Though the concept was at once alien to Will, something decidedly other and out of reach, he wanted nothing more than to offer up some comfort. However much Will himself was uncomfortable with it, in concept, the ache from before had crawled upward into his chest, an itch begging to be rubbed at and soothed.

Will remembered, in his way, how his dad had petted his hand, once, when he had fallen out of a tree, patient until Will had stopped crying. With the sensation of his dad's touch fresh in his thoughts, it was easier to step into the hall and reach forward to settle the tips of his fingers upon the butler's own—trembling subtly where they braced the man against the table.

Signor Doemling seemed to startle, for he had not seen Will approach. But he did not retrieve his hand from beneath Will's, and merely stayed there, breathing harshly into quiet until his wheezing lungs calmed again. Will had to tilt his head back to search Signor Doemling's face; there was more emotion to be found there than ever in Will's memory of the man. Pain, sorrow, and a significant amount of acceptance.

"My thanks," Signor Doemling said, an upward quirk in his usually stoic mouth. The creases around his eyes deepened as he regarded Will, and his trembling finally subsided. "Do not worry for me, little master. All is well."

The butler tipped his head in indication of the hallway Will had come from, where, even now, the muffled sound of effected laughter could be heard.

But Will was not ready to leave, quite yet. Not just because he had no wish to return to the dinner, but because he felt he needed to—he owed Signor Doemling, in some form, for all the trouble Will had caused in the past weeks. Running off and causing such a stir in Madame La Falce's house; it was a wonder the butler could remain so pleasant with Will. Surely he believed Will as pampered and privileged as the rest of the staff did.

Bracing himself, and hoping desperately that he was not erring where he was not wanted, Will offered the truest comfort that he could think to. "Your sons love you," he told Signor Doemling, fragile for all the weight the words held. It was what Will would have wanted his dad to hear, after all.

I've watched you, and I've seen you for what you are. You worry because your sons do not contact you in your old age, and yet you pretend that it does not matter.

If the admission shocked Signor Doemling, he did not let it show. Instead, he lifted his other hand to rest tentatively atop Will's. "You have the eye for this sort of thing, don't you? Feeling, not knowing the difference between others' and what is yours. I would not have noticed if you did not remind me of one of my sons."

Signor Doemling caught his breath once more, then inhaling deeply, he continued, "I have worried for you for some time, but I do not think it is needed now. You found something to ground yourself, and you hold it close. Good. It is—better, than the alternative."

Hannibal, Will thought first. *Hannibal is who I found*. Maybe that was why Signor Doemling's son was different—he never found someone who he did not have to pretend so terribly hard to appear normal before. It was not difficult to imagine what it was like; how hollow loneliness could make a person become.

"Your son?" Will offered, already knowing the answer.

When next Signor Doemling smiled, it did not reach the butler's eyes. Rather, it trembled in the way of the man's hands, unsteady and breaking. "Always pretending, my Cordell. I am more worried for him now than ever before. He does things, says things, sometimes, that are frightening. Things that I—"

Signor Doemling stopped and swallowed thickly, the ball of his throat jumping beneath the furvor of the emotion.

There was a time, Will remembered, when he and his dad were living in Tavernier, and Will's only friend in the world was Hannah. Her muteness often led spoiled children to think themselves bullies. Such an easy target, a few of them went as far as to knock her legs out from under her and hold her to the ground, her soft-fleshed knees scuffing the rough gravel where everyone would eat lunch outside on warm days. In return, she would twist and writhe beneath their hands until she could bite them hard enough to draw blood.

On more than one occasion, Hannah had snuck back inside their tiny classroom and crawled into the blanket fort Will so carefully constructed during nap time. He would find her there eventually, nested on her side with her knees held to her chest, her dark hair fanned out on the

blanket's deep folds, and even in shadow of the fort's drooping walls, Will instantly recognized the splash of another child's blood across her mouth and cheeks.

It was the first and only time in Will's life—before his dad had grown sick, at least—that Will had felt irrevocably frightened. Not for his safety, or the ones she had fought back against tit for tat, but for her own.

After the third time this happened, and Hannah's parents were called in to take her home early, Will had told his dad what had happened on the drive home. His dad had been sympathetic, and had nodded, always understanding. He told Will that there was nothing wrong with him, nor with Hannah. Some people simply carry with them pieces of themselves that are frightening to most others, and things that are frightening are not always wrong by nature alone.

There was another point his dad had made then, tone remarkably serious, windows rolled half down and the smell of ocean salt thick on the wind that rattled the glass as they drove. It had stuck with Will all these years since.

"We love," Will repeated, solemn, "despite the profound proclivity for darkness inherent in the ones we choose to love."

"It is hard, seeing it," said Signor Doemling, words heavy with sorrow. "Knowing you cannot save them from themselves. The way he used to look at people, even as a child...," Signor Doemling paused and looked away, "like animals."

"Your son," Will said slowly. His heart, hardly a flicker before, drummed against his ribs. "What does he do?"

Quizzical, the butler's eyebrows drew neatly together. "Cordell? He is to be a surgeon," he supplied, nevertheless. "His residency in Florence began the last year." A huff of hoarse laughter. "He wanted to be a chef when he was younger, if you can believe it."

Mouth dry, Will stated, "He works at the Santa Maria Nuova hospital."

"Yes." Signor Doemling blinked, a question in the stupefied parting of his mouth. "How did you know?"

In that minute, Will was as certain as that day in the woods in Montespertoli, stood before the well in the clearing where Paola and Antonella's grievous misconduct had been put to task. The same certainty with which he had realized the depth of Il Mostro's appetite.

I would not have noticed if you did not remind me of one of my sons.

Like to like.

Helpless, he could do little else but shiver, as though all the earth had given out from under him.

Will had found his monster.

Chapter 10

Will awoke to a tender and feverish darkness, the likes of which leaked from the furthermost doors in his mind. A dream, one that left him impossibly calm, cocooned in the unencumbered state of the half-awake. He would have been perfectly content to drift forever there, if it were not for a single, curious trait.

It was the sound of a pencil, hushed and then raw where it rasped against rough paper. Will could have counted the strokes.

But he didn’t; rather, his eyes fluttered softly open.

The swelling cavity of the Norman Chapel appeared before him, where he sat, knees pressed together, in a pew not far from the altar steps. Sweat slicked his palms from the honeyed heat of the room, and the back of his neck, where the length of his hair thickened and tangled.

The colors of the room were low and diffuse, how Will imagined the chapel would look in the fullness of night rather than basked in the sunlight that had given life to it the afternoon Will spent here, with Hannibal. Exhaustion had carried Will to sleep, and now it made him slow, blinking upward into the old faces of the murals which stared down at him from the arches. He hadn't the awareness of mind to realize what was happening—where he was, or if this was so much as a dream—until his eyes traveled higher, to where the murals should have given way to the chapel's domed apse.

What greeted Will there was a furthering darkness, not the chapel’s distant ceiling but an unfathomable sky devoid of any and all stars. Will's breathing came faster at the sight, for even barely wakeful he knew with familiarity the makings of his nightmares.

Only then did he notice the scent underscoring the air. Damp, a layer of hot, sinking pressure that pressed inward on his skin. It smelt of pine and moistened moss, and something else, far too vibrant to be given apt description. But likened to the woods in Montespertoli, the sprigs of pink that peppered the forest around the forgotten well, and their blossoms that had hung heavy from their stems with hooded, rain-sodden petals.

The muddiness of the room coalesced around its center. As Will’s vision came to rights, and he forced himself to stand, his eyes were drawn there—and to the rust-stained body of a pickup truck, where it lay splayed down the altar steps, its back wheels set against the marble tile and the open truckbed falling just shy of the place where the strange skeleton had marked the floor.

The image it made was, to Will, unnaturally still, jarring where it fit together. Though the seductive weight of sleep pulled at him as it always did when he dreamed, Will stepped forward. Then again, and again. Until he was halfway between the pew and the truck, and every swallow of air he took into his lungs became thicker, wettening the inside of his mouth in such a way he feared he might drown.

Around him, the chapel began to fragment at its seams. Beyond the truck, the mosaics of Saint Peter and Andrew and the Jesus Pantocrator peeled and rotted, their eyes watching Will even as fungus grew from their mouths, their stripped robes and cracking hands. So, too, did life grow from the murals which decayed around him as he moved closer. Feathery ferns curled down from the curves of pillars, bright orange and brown leaves puckered from the uneven dips of tile across the floor, and where parishioners would have sat praying atop the wooden pews the softening, cupped heads of mushrooms grew.

The only thing that managed to ground Will was the sound of the pencil. Steady and sketching, as repetitive as the beating of his heart under his ribs.

Where the inlaid skeleton had rested was a scattering of wilted, dried out leaves. Once Will had reached the back of the truck, he used his bare foot to swipe them away, skittering and scratching over the tilework as they went. In their wake, the maroon circle set into floor revealed itself like a red sun. The skeleton was gone; only a fine dusting of cracks remained.

It was at that moment that the glaze over Will's gaze receded, and he startled awake as though he had been sleepwalking—choking, a moment, and sucking air in greedily even as it stuck to the walls of his throat on the way down. He was too short to see into the truckbed from where he stood, and felt only apprehension at the thought of what may await him there.

"No," Will found himself saying without realizing. His head flicked up, eyes jumping, and he searched desperately throughout the room for a way out. "I won't—"

It was impossible to tell where the chapel ended and the canopy of starless sky and sunken boughs began. Parts of his subconscious he wished to hide away forever, and the dark woods that populated it, encroached inward on the one memory Will had hoped to keep for himself. Would the monster be soon to follow?

Swallowing back on the bile that rushed to coat his teeth, Will took those final steps forward and peered down into the pickup's cavernous bed. He saw neither Chloris nor Zephyrus there, not in their original forms or that of the dead bodies they newly took. He saw only Il Mostro's careful handiwork of poppies and rosemary in shades of white and faded, powder-pink, set back against the decorous leaved fronds of the *Primavera*. Where the bodies of the professors had once lain was but a singular, fleshy and freshly harvested organ; served, for all the world, like the centerpiece of an innately depraved dish.

A human heart, nestled cleanly within the extravagant bouquet. Will marveled at it for a moment, caught not by revulsion as he had once been at the idea of Il Mostro consuming Paola's heart whole, but by wonder. At the neatness of the cuts which had freed it from flesh, and what little remained of the blood that had once circulated inside. The muscle and veins glowed, translucent, among the budded flowers, even in the potent gloom of the chapel as it appeared to Will now.

Almost unthinking, Will reached out to touch—and without having made the conscious decision to do so, he picked it up instead. The lopsided shape of the atria and ventricles lay unmoving against his sweat-slick palm. Not rubbery, or distasteful in the slightest, but fragile and weightless in the cupped bow of his hands. Something prickled at the base of Will's

skull; the flowers' fragrance drifted upward and filled his nose with a sweetness so very cloying, and he felt the oddest compulsion stirring in his gut to bring the heart to his mouth—

A muscle running across the heart's upper half twitched and spasmed, followed by the atria and ventricles in turn. It pulsed, a heartbeat in all that mattered, once and then again, until the beat had picked up and drummed a slow, steadying rhythm.

A cold chill slid down Will's spine, pooling nearest his hips before climbing up into his stomach, where it coiled and hemorrhaged into fear. Horrified, Will would have dropped the heart back down into the truckbed if it were not for the twin, sharp pricks of pain at his elbows. How stupid of him, to not catch the muted stench of copper beneath that of the flowers. For the feathered monster of his nightmares was here now, with him, and it did not want him to stop.

That sharpness belonged to the tines of its antlers, angled so as to rest at Will's sides. Though soon they, too, were gone; replaced instead with the firmness of a snout at the small of his back, encouraging and inviting both.

See? whispered the monster, a familiar note of pleasure with a predilection for filling even the most shadowed corners of Will's mind.

Helpless, Will's knees locked up, and he was very aware of the possibility that he might shake apart. That was, until the beating heart—Paola's, it *had to be*—grew fast and erratic. It was no longer a natural thing, but something far worse; something trapped inside was pushing its way out. The aorta contracted, and the veins, they trembled so. Around Will, the chapel fell dimmer still, and he no longer heard the idle scratching of a pencil. Only the half-stag beast heaving heavy gushes of hot, panting breath against the curvature of his spine.

Then the flesh pilled down the middle, rising until the translucent sheen of it flickered and parted like oil dancing across water, and the heart split in half; surgical in its symmetry.

Will did not scream. Rather, panicking, he did the only thing he could think to do: he clenched his hands tight around each half, and squeezed. The resulting pain that burned through the bones of his fingers was excruciating.

He woke up not quite sobbing, but with a faint promise of it to come. Breath halting though unlabored, his eyes refocused in the shallow semi-dark of his mother's courtyard garden. It was nearly dawn, and the garden was not yet more than a wash of grey. As for Will—he was wet, for sure; drenched from the rain pouring down around him even now. His positioning was uncomfortable because he was crouched in the thick of a rose bush with his knees digging deep scores in the mud.

The musk of the roses was too strong, so close. Spiced and sticky, Will had to drag his head away to muffle a sneeze in his soaked sleeve. However, it was the pain in his fingers and palms that caused him the most discomfort. Blinking away the last dregs of drowsiness, Will stared down at where his hands stretched forward into the bush—and apparently, where he had gripped onto a nasty tangle of thorns beneath a cluster of ripe roses. When he removed his hands, and brought them back to cradle aside his chest, they smelt faintly of the blood that

had riddled the air in his nightmare. Drops of it formed briefly where the thorns had pierced skin, before disappearing just as quickly beneath the spatter of rain.

Had he done this in his sleep? he wondered, head addled with fog. For surely he had been sleepwalking; there was no other explanation. How he had managed to climb from his balcony down into the garden, however, was not something he wanted to think about.

Thankfully, today was to be a hotter day. The courtyard was warm enough that the rain, though cold, was welcome against Will's arms and in his hair. He held his stinging hands to his chest and turned his face up against it, willing away the lingering after-images stained behind his eyelids, of the gruesome version of the chapel that had been warped into grotesqueness by his subconscious, and surely the monster that prowled it. Shoulders hunched, he pushed up on his feet, clumsy as he went.

If it were not for the tiring trials of the day prior, it was very likely that Will would not have managed to sleep through the night. His thoughts had grown shuttered after he had left Signor Doemling and returned to dinner, and all throughout the final courses he had stared emptily at his plate, a miasma of anticipation and an altogether unnatural hunger curdling anew inside his chest.

Cordell Doemling ticked all the boxes that would make him the Monster of Florence.

All night, Will had to ponder what he would see once he gazed upon the man's outer face, and past it. Would Will recognize a predisposed nature there, the same that called out to him in his own nightmares? Would Will see the monster for all that he was; kith and kin, enraptured and indecently laid bare?

He would not know until he had the chance to look. The idea alone had kept Will awake in bed for hours, tossing and messing the sheets in his excitable turning.

It was not, however, until the gentle fixtures of the Norman Chapel had formed and taken shattered shape in the course of his dreaming that Will came to reconsider the disorder of his emotions. Out here in the garden now, where the play of the damp heat and cooler rain soothed away the sizable knot twisting his lower gut, Will realized his mind was attempting to tell himself something important.

See? the antlered monster had asked, so very polite.

The same it had asked of Will every time that it found him, when it chose to show Will such terrible, awful things. And now: Paola's still-beating heart, served to Will just as Il Mostro's *Primavera* murders had been, was something new and of deliberate purpose. It worried Will that he could not parse what the wendigo wished him to see there, and troubled him all the more.

Once the prickle in his hands had subsided, Will leant forward to graze a thumb under the bell-curl of a rose bud which grew from the middling height of the bush. Alessandra favored the same powdery pinks for her flowers as Il Mostro had for the recreation of the Botticelli so long ago now. When Will had held the heart in his mind, it had felt smooth, supple. The sheen of white had resembled that of the poppies arranged wildly across the truckbed, and

much like their thin petals, the delicate layers of vein and muscle had separated into twin halves as though compelled to open like a flower in bloom.

As was Will compelled to taste—a feeling that, in his dream, had felt perfectly reasonable. Though now it only tightened the knot in Will's stomach. He could not make himself examine this instinct of his too closely; he tucked the remnants of his nightmare away for good, and turned his mind toward the present.

More importantly, there was the looming matter of Il Mostro, and Will's newest epiphany—

That all along, Will's monster had been closer than he could ever have imagined.

Will waited in the rain just a moment more before slipping back onto the marked path that ran around the garden. He had to push through the thorny brush to do so, and wrapped his arms around himself to protect the raw nerves in his hands. In the greying darkness, Will's shoeless feet tripped over the stones underfoot, sliding too easily where rainwater had created pools in the caked dirt. With his focus shifted to navigating his way back to his balcony, Will managed to empty out his head for the first time since he'd truly and physically sat in the Norman Chapel the previous day.

It did not stop the guilt from returning, or the briefest thoughts of Hannibal. Once Will had climbed back up the ivy and was pulling dry clothes from his dresser, he breathed out noisily and sat down on the edge of his bed. He was disquieted, still, by the manner in which he had woken. His nights were not usually plagued with nightmares as they once had been; at least, not since Will had taken to curling up with Hannibal's suit jacket held close in the cover of dark.

Will rubbed at his face, disregarding of the twinge in his hand. But that was—no, he had made his decision, and he stood by it. He would not inconvenience Hannibal any more than he already had. The jacket was not his to keep, Will had rightfully returned it, and that was all that mattered.

It was times like these that his mind felt fit to break, but Will could not allow that to stop him from tracking down the man he believed to be Il Mostro. He had already known he needed to leave the house again; to see Hannibal, and apologize for leaving Palermo without him and without warning. However now it was more important that Will find this man, this Cordell Doemling, at the Santa Maria Nuova hospital.

Of course, Will would have been good to contact Inspector Pazzi—it was the right thing to do. But selfishly, Will did not want to. Pazzi would only make things complicated, when all Will wanted—*needed*—was to know if Il Mostro felt the same connection that Will felt to him. And to discover if gazing upon his monster would tell Will what it was he felt to begin with.

Why do I feel that I know you? Why when I see the breath of your creation, do I see myself looking back?

Anxiety carved out a space all its own along his shoulder blades and down the length of his spine, buzzing like static. Alessandra was to be at another function today, after the bulk of her

meetings had run out for the morning. As for Signor Doemling—the butler had informed Will that he would be taking sick leave for the next several days at the request of his doctor.

Will would have no trouble, this time. Not without Pazzi here to interfere.

It was now or never.

When the morning had turned over into afternoon, and the rain had not given any indication of stopping, Will found the narrow streets of Florence surprisingly lacking of crowds. From what he had gleaned from the street signs and the passable Italian in his repertoire, the Santa Maria Nuova hospital resided almost directly northeast of the Ponte Vecchio, and the haze of fog that had settled over the Arno since the rain had begun hours earlier.

This did not stop Florentine citizens from driving their tiny, expensive cars through the slush, or elegantly-dressed couples out on their way to lunch, only the dark heads of their umbrellas heralding their approach and departure. The shops that were open were lit warmly, light pouring into the streets the same as the water spilling over the cobbled stones, and proved little discouragement to passerbys as to enter inside.

Not wanting to encourage conversation with those who glanced at him twice—*how odd it was, for a boy his age to be out in the pouring rain*—Will snatched a collapsible umbrella from one of the tourist stands not far from his home. By that point, however, the shoulders of his jacket were dark with damp, as were his shoes and the ankles of his pants.

Head down to avoid the eyes of those he passed, he walked the route to the hospital on quick and calculating feet. At occasional intersections, taxis beeped and sounded their displeasure through the rain, and all the while Will felt his heartbeat in his throat. He did not overthink where he was going, or what he was about to do, lest his fingers start to tremble against the slippery handle of his little umbrella and fail to stop.

The Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova was an old and sprawling set of buildings even by Florence's standards. The parking lot and emergency lanes ran alongside the L-shaped structure of the Portico of Buontalenti. Arches bolstered the bottom level, under which the covered walkway led in to other parts of the hospital. Several red and white EMS trucks idled close by, *Emergenza Medica* painted across the bulk of the vehicles.

Will's size was decidedly useful for bypassing the people milling about the sidewalk and entrances. He skirted the bicycle racks and headed inside the closest doorway, unbothered—which was all well and good, considering how stressed and oblivious most of the people here were. Those that were not tourists, out in the parking lot and street taking pictures, were frazzled medics, staff, or the family of patients. In truth, due to this wing of the hospital likely being the emergency ward.

The inside of the hospital was more modern than Will expected. The outside matched the coloring of most Florence buildings with its slate browns and charcoal stonework. The inside, however, was cleaner and less...warm. Sterile white or faint cream greeted him wherever he looked. Put-off only slightly by the juxtaposition, Will moved further into the hospital and

followed the signs that would direct him to general surgery. That would be where he might find Signor Doemling's son, was it not?

It was difficult to keep the commotion of the hospital from insinuating itself within his twitchy mind. Will was on edge as it was—risking coming here at all, and so foolishly on his own. To be suddenly barraged by the distant sobs of families, the beeping of equipment through open doors and attached to trolleys that nurses rushed by on wheeled gurneys; all of it, compounded by the mixture of raised and whispering voices, added together into something too nerve-racking to be ignored.

Outwardly, Will was sure to school his expression into one befitting of a schoolboy his age. Shy but unhindered, and above all, patently bereft of any fear or emotional upheaval he might be prone to channeling. It would not be the first time, accident or not, that Will mirrored the loudest emotions in the room. And now he did not think he could handle the energy it would drain from him.

His wandering eventually led him to a small reception area on the other side of the hospital. This one was carpeted neutrally: geometric swirls in shades of purple and deep plum, coupled with the same white walls as the many hallways. A young woman attended the desk, and sat clacking at a computer on the counter with utmost concentration. She had dark hair and light eyes—eyes that could have seen Natalina Mauriot traverse these very halls. But it would not do to reveal such knowledge as that; by this point, it was a sure thing that Pazzi had been here before Will, and for that he must be careful of what he said.

Sizing her up only briefly, Will took on the outer mask of a worried child. He lowered his lashes and wetted his lower lip with a flicker of tongue, after which he fitted his hands together behind him, tilting them into the small of his back as he approached. Then, softly dulcet, he spoke in practiced Italian, "Excuse me, but I am looking for one of the surgeons. Dr. Doemling's father has fallen ill and was taken to another hospital. I was asked to find him."

Surprise flittered over the woman's expression, and she leant forward to smile at Will with kind eyes. Her hair, though long like Natalina's, was straight rather than curled, and fell against her cheek when she inclined in her seat.

You are roughly the same age, Will thought but carefully did not say. *It could have been you. It could have been, but he chose her instead—why?*

Aside from her coloring, the receptionist did not resemble Alessandra in the slightest. Flat nose and thin lips; where Natalina's similarities had been uncomfortably uncanny.

Another line of thought dissolved to ash in Will's mind, and he turned over the next.

"Cordell?" the woman supplied, faint of breath from her surprise. Though clearly it was not at Will, but at the subject of his question. Swift and calculating, Will caught the purse of her lips, the twitch in the corner of her left eye. *Cordell has family?* she desperately wished to ask. "I'm sorry, but he has just entered surgery."

Feigning guileless dejection, Will let his eyes drop to the desk surface, lashes falling across his cheeks. “Oh,” he breathed out, a short but pointed note. Then, mutely fervent, “*Per favore*.”

After a moment, the woman rose from her seat. She canted her head at him, mouth curling into something gentler. *Poor boy*, her eyes seemed to say, when Will cared to look again. This was how he knew he had her. “They are performing a viewing, if you would like to wait there for the time being?”

She led him down another series of hallways, these quiet, and lacking of any other people save themselves. Will did not allow himself to think of the last time he had been in a hospital, or the hollow emptiness of the halls that had led to his dad’s cramped room. It was growing increasingly hard to manage even that.

Thankfully, the woman chose that moment to open a door that read *Floor B* on a plaque beside the entryway. Will followed close at her heels, only to stop, taken aback, at the expansive room that lay beyond it. It was spacious enough to fit a small crowd, and without any adornments but the few plastic chairs set back against the far wall. It was dark; all light that inhabited the room—curiously, tinted a milky blue—came from the waist-height window that ran the length of the wall directly beside the door.

Once Will had stepped inside, he approached the window with slow and unsure steps. Mesmerized, his eyes jumped all around the room on the opposite side of the glass. Strange, concave overhead lights hung from the ceiling, angled so as to light, impossibly bright, upon an operating table set in the center. All manner of equipment filled the room—those which made strange keening noises and others which kept steadier beats. Anesthesia, ventilators, IV fluids, and flitting between them, a handful of nurses dressed in hospital scrubs with hats and masks, making notations on clipboards and adjusting dials.

There was a man on the operating table; already, he slept restfully under anesthesia and a multitude of numbing drugs. Pale and sallow-skinned beneath the white light, his gown had been parted to reveal the expanse of his rounded stomach—scrubbed clean, sterile.

Distracted by the sight, and kept there by the pull of unfettered curiosity, Will only then noticed that the receptionist had left, though he was not quite alone in the room. Two other adults stood at the far end of the glass, smartly dressed and observing calmly with hardly any words shared that weren’t low whispers discussing the procedure.

The words *exploratory laparotomy* passed easily between them.

If they noticed Will’s presence, he did not prove important enough to warrant comment. Neither did Will believe the nurses could see him through the glass. The viewing room was much too dim. He suspected the glass was either tinted, or visible but one-way, so as to not take attention away from the patient. The anxiety rolling within him along tidy waves subsided, somewhat, as he focused instead on the monotonous noise of the operating theater. Will’s mind wished to stray to memories of his dad, toward the end, when his condition had worsened beyond help; Will would not let it.

Not long after Will had entered into the room, so too did more of the surgical staff enter into the operating theater on the opposite side of the glass. The surgeons wore green scrubs; the one at the lead was clearly the head of the team, while the two trailing behind were there to observe for the time being.

Another flurry of activity started up. Precise and quick, the head surgeon prepared an incision site down the man's chest and stomach using a sterile drape, after which the drape was attached to the surrounding skin with clamps. The lead surgeon stepped back, and one of the two others came forward to begin the first cut.

Will watched, fascinated. Though their masks obscured their faces, Will could see a glimpse of their eyes at a distance. The head surgeon was old and broad shouldered, though surprisingly, looked to be a woman. The second surgeon, the one with scalpel in hand, was squatter; more meat to his bones. He did not appear to have hair beneath his cap, although far more interesting was the distance held in his eyes as his scalpel sunk into the patient's chest, and began a slender glide downward.

The squat surgeon, Will mused, was hiding something—and rather unwell, at that. An itch bothered at Will's skin beneath his layered clothes. One of these surgeons had to be Cordell. And now came the very moment that Will was to probe this connection between them. The itch grew strong enough to burn. With no other aid to see his monster's face, it was the very chance Will had dearly hoped for—dropped directly into his lap, so to speak. The chance to recognize his monster behind eyes alone.

The second surgeon did not maintain the neatness of one with decades of experience. Where he surpassed skill in speed and accuracy, he forewent delicacy and a steady hand; the drape and surrounding skin grew red with building blood. What could not be staunched with gauze made wet, dripping lines down the sides of the table.

Will's hands clenched and loosened at his sides, sweating as thickly as they had in his dream and out in the heat of the garden. He did not wipe them against his jacket; rather, his eyes grew unfocused as they danced from the slow revealing of the patient's abdominal cavity up to the second surgeon's face. The distance in the man's brown eyes gave way to tremendous satisfaction as his work was rewarded, and with the open blossom of the patient's viscera and organs beneath his own hands, no less.

However, that satisfaction was eerily devoid of emotional attachment. It could have been a fulfillment of instinct, perhaps, and nothing more. There but a moment, and then gone again before Will had the barest time to catch it.

That itch rekindled again, where it had climbed sweetly to cling to the back of his neck. At once distracted from his intense calculation, Will tilted his head a minute angle to the side.

And sucked in a startled breath that caught coldly in his lungs. How remiss he had been, to forget the third surgeon who had entered into the theater. They struck a reserved but palpable presence, as though standing apart from all others who inhabited the room, if not visibly nor arguably so.

It was a gut feeling, one which compounded into alarm when Will raised his gaze to peruse this last surgeon's face—and was met, there, with another pair of eyes staring straight back. Nothing about them read surprise or anger, having caught Will's presence and in the act of looking in on a surgery he had no business observing. Who was he, but an unknown? A young boy surely worth the preservation of his innocence. What kind of boy, indeed, would so keenly watch a surgery without twitching?

But Will had long blurred out the activity of the room in favor of the faces it held. That of the third surgeon, who watched Will with a familiar, banked heat. The lighting within the operating theater was too bright. It cast a sterility about the room, and brought into sharp relief the dusk maroon of the surgeon's eyes. No, not surprised, but tinged with a remote spillage of awe.

"Hannibal," Will murmured aloud.

Chapter 11

The moment Hannibal's name slipped from Will's mouth, he dearly wished he could take it back. For as soon as he had said it, far across the glass and the space of the operating room, the skin around Hannibal's eyes crinkled ever so slightly. It was not pleasure, to be exact, but something far more disorienting.

Amusement, Will decided absently, a thought which settled with distinct wrongness in the sudden, glaring emptiness of his head. Where all else fled, a memory grew and festered: that of the butterflies petrified beneath delicately-pressed glass in Hannibal's dining room, and which now gave rise to a stark sensation of weightlessness in Will's belly.

This isn't real, Will told himself. *This isn't—Hannibal can't be here.*

It would not be the first time his mind had played its tricks; it certainly would not be the last. But the tremor of shock that spread through Will's mind and body told him otherwise. Let alone the immense physicality of those eyes, which bore into Will as though they could reach inside of him and scrape the very clarity from the lining of his skull.

This was real. And so was Hannibal.

For a time, the sharp sounds of the monitoring equipment, the surgeons and nurses as they moved about the theater, became muddled, unobtrusive. It was not a feeling that Will was unused to. In his worst moments, as a child much younger than he was now, his body's natural response to overstimulation was to sever it at its source. Wade out into the stream, but never lose oneself enough to fear not making it back. In the absence of all sound, desensitized, Will was lulled by that current, loosened from his moorings and buried beneath layers of silt and brackish water.

Will's eyes unfocused and drifted back to the bald surgeon, who had risen to the occasion and was finally conducting an examination of his patient's cracked abdominal cavity. The brown gloves which covered the surgeon's hands were made black beneath the theater's harsh lights, and liquefied, in turn, under the coating of blood there. Already, a thorough mess had been made of the drape clamped to the patient's skin, the floor and the legs of the instrument table beside him.

A fluttery, hooded pleasure blotted the surgeon's eyes as he, at last, set down his scalpel. Those eyes had been muddied before, a deep and unflattering brown; now though, their pupils fattened with dilation.

In his mind, Will wade out into the shallows of a stream. He saw his starless sky there, high above his head. A silver pendulum appeared in the darkness. Quiet, it began to swing.

I see their faces, and I see in each a pitiable, witless thing that is beneath me. They are not like her, but they could be immortalized as she was. The urge is quiet, not yet there, but it simmers. I feel the spidery cracks it leaves across my skin.

Some of them come to me, and to my knife, and I see their inner colors become vivid strokes of paint upon my hands. Hers had been beautiful, too, dripping and resplendent and red. The urge crawls forth on spindled, starving legs.

The ones that remind me most of her, I will take months from now, or a year. I immortalize them, one by one. When the urge recalls the taste and it is time to indulge.

This is my design.

Will returned to the shadowed room on the cusp of a wrathful shudder. It trembled outward from his chest, a painful reminder of where he was, and the monster hiding among them.

Like animals, Signor Doemling had remarked of Cordell's particular affinity for humanity. Two words which tumbled from Will's mind just as more blood cascaded down the drape hanging past the sides of the operating table. When next Will sought out the surgeon's eyes, he could manage no further than the black painting his hands. Dexterous, and assured of their skill, they continued to move even as more blood ran.

This was how Will knew, in his way, that the surgeon was Cordell Doemling.

Like a well given to overflowing, Will saw something monstrous seep from Cordell's eyes, and the flagrant delight which dwelled there. Only impressions leeched in, not enough to be certain what Will had seen there. No—he would need to be closer, and to meet Il Mostro's burning gaze looking back.

Again, disorientation swept over him. Will recalled with instant horror the reality of Hannibal's presence here—and turning, he saw that Hannibal was no longer staring at him, but at the place where Cordell had carelessly tossed the scalpel. It had landed not on an empty spot on the table, but atop a pile of clean instruments, spattering them unnecessarily in the process.

The expression that Hannibal now wore was one of idle, cursory derision.

For Hannibal to be here, observing a surgery in which *Cordell Doemling* was an active participant, should not have been possible. It was a coincidence far too disquieting to accept as reality. Had Hannibal worked alongside Il Mostro all the weeks past? Had he been in danger all this time? The thought did perilous things to Will's stomach.

He looked again to Cordell. He did not know what he expected to find. For as much as Will ached for Il Mostro and all the possibilities thereof, the monster did not know Will, nor of him. It was a seductive idea, however; one that impressed upon Will to seek out Cordell's eyes once more, and urge Cordell with all of his quiet being to spot him from across the theater. Do you see me? Will wanted to beg. As I see you?

Where he stood, in his mind, in the shallows before his stream, the water flowed under him. Black as tar, it broke round the callused swells of his feet and lipped at the exposed bone of his ankles. The pendulum no longer swung, but the scattered afterimages had engraved themselves into the space behind his eyelids. *Red, so much red*—in the real world, Will's

glassy-eyed stare drifted to his own raised hands. In his mind, blood seeped from beneath his nails and trickled down his fingers.

Did you take your victims with hands bared for touching?

Blissed out on shared elation at the sight—a product of Cordell's hunger, which had wormed its way into Will's head—Will did not at first notice that his earlier, crawling itch had returned along his nape.

Hannibal was watching Will again, and there was a tangible stillness to his expression; slackened, now, to something approaching empty. It held a continued idleness, but one which turned acutely attentive as Hannibal observed the myriad of revelatory sensations which surely flashed across Will's eyes like an open wound.

What must Hannibal think of him? For doubtless, it was obvious that Will was dazedly intent on Cordell. Yet, Hannibal showed not a single emotion at all, not least from what was visible of his eyes above the surgical mask.

A moment passed, then another, before Will could tear himself away from Cordell. Trembling from the aftershocks of his vision, he noticed Hannibal then, and was made warm once more by what he saw: a calming pull of nothingness in the empty dark of Hannibal's eyes. They stood out starkly in the knife-bright light of the theater, a study in contrasts. For where Will had managed to catch glimpses of Cordell's nature, Hannibal had only ever been an unreadable fixture in the time that Will had known him.

All this time, Will had wanted to see Il Mostro, to know him—but the vulnerability of that connection terrified him far more so than the implication of what Il Mostro truly was. It made Will want to turn the whole of his body away from Cordell and back to Hannibal; like a flower, thick in bloom, tilting up from the shade and into sunlight. All of it, contained in this remarkable need of Will's to crawl inside Hannibal and never emerge.

Maybe then he would be safe, even from his monster.

Lost in the thought for but a moment, Will did not return to himself until the surgery had apparently finished. Cordell began closing up the patient's abdominal cavity as instructed, after which the patient was transferred and wheeled out. The surgeons filed out after, and Hannibal did not deign to linger. Will jumped to attention before long, and hurried out of the observation room after them, pushing past the others who had made it to the door before him. He did not know what it was that compelled him forward with such sudden, broken ferocity. But, perhaps, it was to catch Cordell Doemling before the man had chance to disappear.

Once out in the hall, Will saw just a hint of Cordell seconds before he rounded the corner at the far end. To Will, who did not frequent the hospital as others might have, these hallways were labyrinthine in their design. His only recourse would be to catch up with Cordell before Will had truly lost him. He did not have much time left.

Only just keeping from breaking into a run, Will took off in the direction that Cordell had gone. He was unprepared to come upon the doorway of a sort of private lounge; neither was he prepared to meet Cordell's eyes from across the room. The man was speaking with the

head surgeon, and glanced away from his conversation to pass his eyes over Will. Moderate interest, perhaps even curiosity at his presence here should have been expected, but what presented itself across Cordell's untidy features was, in the end, a marked distaste.

Will swallowed down on his anxiety and took his first step into the room. His next, though less decided, never managed to take him forward. For it was just as soon as he'd laid eyes on Cordell and sought to close the distance between them, that a barely-there weight fell upon Will's shoulder. And turning, his own heartbeat like ash in the back of his mouth, he identified that weight as belonging to a hand.

Long, thin fingers curled over the slope of Will's shoulder. Their frailty was convincing, but from the way the fabric of his jacket scrunched beneath the pressure of those fingers, Will recognized in them a promise of undisclosed strength. The hand curved to fit easily against Will, and a muscle jumped beneath the skin, where pronounced vein stretched over deceptively-fine bone.

Then the fingers squeezed, just once and with purpose, pressing in such a way to avoid the issue of pain. Will knew without looking who the hand belonged to, but he raised his eyes, breath catching, all the same. He was met with the same curiously empty expression that Hannibal had levelled upon Will from within the operating theater. However, now it was made terribly soft in the different lighting, as welcoming as it was calculated, for Hannibal's eyes seemed to flicker round, searching Will's face.

Behind him, Will thought he heard receding footsteps as the other surgeons left this room for the one attached. That meant Cordell had yet again escaped, and Will was now left with Hannibal alone.

Swallowing down a second time on his nerves, Will allowed that line of thought to fall to dust without fight. It was an objectively impressive feat, in any case, for Will to manage concerning himself with anything beyond Hannibal when held within the orbit of his captivating presence. Much less now, with Hannibal's expression spilling over into wonder. At what, Will hadn't the faintest idea, though that wonder was gone as soon as it had revealed itself. Whatever Hannibal seemed to find on Will's face also appeared to leave him wanting, for a slight purse formed about his mouth, minute in his displeasure.

Those eyes jumped to the door through which Cordell had disappeared, and burned there but a moment, before returning finally to their fixed resting place on Will.

Familiar guilt surged up hotly in Will's belly. He blurted, rapid and breathless, "I was rude."

Ah yes, that. The one thing that had rested heaviest on Will's mind since yesterday: leaving Hannibal behind in Palermo.

Though Hannibal made no move to reclaim the hand he'd placed on Will's shoulder, at his side, he held in his other the surgical mask he'd worn throughout the surgery. It was green, like his surgeon scrubs, and hung limply from its ribbon ties. For a time, Hannibal stared at Will blankly. Then Will's words seemed to register, for there was a whisper of fabric—the surgical mask, crumpling in the slow clench of Hannibal's fist.

"You were," Hannibal allowed at length. His mouth parted slightly, the tip of his tongue poised to dart out and wet his bottom lip as he stared at Will.

In the corner of Will's eye, he saw another minute spasm of muscle across the back of Hannibal's hand. It was the same itch that Will knew so well himself. On Hannibal, it was necessity, and a lurking need to gather Will close.

What was it that Hannibal was waiting for?

"I'm sorry," Will continued, after another prolonged stare that connected them so. "For leaving you."

He wondered what Hannibal could see of his emotional state now. How it shivered from the base up, threatening to crumble, and how desperate Will was for Hannibal to stop that from happening. When he spoke again, Will hated the childish supplication which leaked into his voice, one he had thought carefully excised from himself years before, and for that, he hated it more.

"Please don't be angry."

Hannibal cocked his head the barest amount, tongue at once flicking from behind his teeth, an opportunistic tasting of the air. That open wonder spread across his face in its wake, and cast in the convoluted shadow of Hannibal's eyes an inkling of the same awe that Will had ached to see in the theater.

"Dear Will," Hannibal said, gentle in his admonishment. "I could never be angry at you. Only the circumstances which sought to take you from me."

Like on the train, and in the enclosed cabin that had protected them from prying eyes, Will saw so very much of Hannibal but never enough. Again, that hunger filled Hannibal's eyes, so deep that beneath the brittle fluorescents, even the whites of his sclera darkened. And again, Will did not know it for what it was.

"I know who he is," Will spoke softly, as the pads of Hannibal's fingers pressed into his jacket, hard enough to feel. "The Monster."

"Do you," murmured Hannibal. *Always the cunning boy*, the flecks of mirth in his eyes seemed to say as they surfaced brilliantly from the dark.

Shaking free of the hold Hannibal's attention had on him was not easy. When Will managed to do so, he glanced to the door through which Cordell had disappeared. It was quiet in the lounge; sterile, and untouched but for the pound of Will's heart in his throat and ears. *You trust Hannibal*, he reminded himself. *He wouldn't let Cordell hurt you.*

Beside him, the air no longer stirred from Hannibal's breathing. It became instead anticipatory, eager. *Impossible*, Will thought. Hannibal could not have known this to be the reason why Will came here, could he?

"What do you know," Will asked, slow, and watchful of Hannibal's face, "about Cordell Doemling?"

The question took almost entirely too long to sink in. When it did, Hannibal did not visibly react, or at least, not as much in words. However, that complex and nameless emotion which had come to consume the whole of Hannibal's countenance smoothed over into something decidedly uncertain.

"Cordell," Hannibal repeated faintly. Animal-like, he tilted his head, while a pinch in the corner of his mouth marred the unaffected line of his lips. The uncertainty written upon his face, which had been intensely and vibrantly expressive seconds before, shriveled and died. What replaced it was not quite the same, rather it was blank, profound in its coldness.

Recognition, when it came to Will, had the dusting of hair at the back of his neck rising to stand on end. Did it upset Hannibal, knowing that Will suspected a colleague of such monstrous acts as these? Would he hate Will, resent him? The idea alone had Will squirming beneath Hannibal's sharpening gaze. Would Will even survive such rejection, when he—when he *couldn't*. Couldn't stop the things he felt and thought; this mental proclivity for Il Mostro's kindred mind and the answering darkness of their natures. Will did not want to accept this about himself; he feared that Hannibal would not either.

"He is a fledgling surgeon," Hannibal remarked, low. His tone was far too distant, and strangely, he spoke as though to only himself. "Educated, odd in many respects. He fits the profile, does he not?"

Not a question, merely an acknowledgement of fact.

"I don't see all of him yet," Will whispered. "His design. But what I saw during the surgery, it..."

Hannibal's next words, when they came, saw fit to surprise Will. How easy it was, for a touch of contempt to color the sultry cadence of Hannibal's accent. "Was proof enough of Cordell's utter singularity," he finished.

Will imagined the way Cordell would consume his victims. There had been a woman—he knew as much from what he had seen crawl from the black depths of Cordell's nature. The vision had grasped at Will with greedy, grease-slick claws that hooked in his skin and caught. A woman that Cordell had met and that he had believed could see him, know him. Elevated to almost an equal, before she had betrayed him by doing something he perceived as deserving of his darkest, most instinctual urges.

Her consumption would have elevated her, at long last, to something which was rightfully deserving, would it not?

Heat burned at the edges of Will's mind and grew molten behind his eyes. It was jealousy, and Will was not strong enough to crush it even as it budded anew.

"Yes," was all Will managed. He did not rub at his chest where the pain concentrated, no matter how he yearned to soothe the ache of his envy.

Hannibal's jaw twitched, and for a time, he took on the air of distinct contemplation. His hand fell away from Will's shoulder, finally, though Will missed its grounding weight the second it had gone. "Perhaps," Hannibal began, "it would interest you to know that there have been... incidents for which Dr. Doemling was brought in for questioning alongside others on the staff. A shock, to be sure, but maybe there was truth in the polizia's suspicions, and Cordell Doemling played no small part in the disappearances of those women."

Women, came the heady whisper from the pit of Will's thoughts. *Women, not couples. And did the papers not believe Il Mostro to prefer his victims in loving twos?*

"How many?" Will asked, voice grown small and distant as the faces of the Botticelli professors, of Paola and Antonella, danced through his mind. Was there more to their choosing that Will had not accounted for? Had he misstepped, and all this time thought wrongly of the nature of their becomings?

Humming lowly, Hannibal allowed, "Three, as I recall it. Notable for their similarities in youth and physical description. I was not a witness to the interrogations, as this occurred the past year, but I have been told that the supposed victims were attended to at this hospital before vanishing some time after."

When Will did not immediately respond, and instead lowered his eyes to the floor, Hannibal canted his head in a bid to catch Will's gaze again.

"If you wish to know for certain," Hannibal murmured, far softer than Will deserved. "I imagine the relevant newspapers could be found at the university, in the library archives."

Was it pity or something far more complex that compelled Hannibal to indulge him? Because Will made leaps he couldn't explain; to anyone else, Cordell could just as well appear an innocent man. How then would Will explain himself? If not to Hannibal, then to the polizia, to Pazzi?

But Hannibal was smiling now, the eerie nothingness gone from his eyes, leaving only warmth in place of it. Will felt that same niggling urge as he had earlier in the theater—to crawl inside that warmth, never to be bereft of the slight curve of Hannibal's smile. Perhaps now, he could do just that.

"Will," Hannibal said, after a touch. His eyes paved deep paths down the planes of Will's face, no longer calculating as they had been before, but glowing like the lingering embers of black coals beneath the sheer immensity of Hannibal's fondness. "Where did you go?" That smile grew slighter. "Retreating inside? I do hope you are not planning anything rash. If you would allow it, I only ask that you not be a danger to yourself."

"Myself," Will repeated, softened in his puzzlement, and more than reasonably dazed.

Already, his mind was miles away. He would go to the library, then; abandon this approach for another. Hannibal was right—Will was putting himself in danger by going after Cordell directly. This would require a steady, decisive hand. Will was dealing with Il Mostro, after all. His monster was intelligent, manipulative. If Will was not careful...

"The dog that bites first will never leave hungry," said Hannibal, smile sharp and knowing. A hint of crooked canine peeked from behind his upper lip. "Tell me, Will, what hunger are you feeling now?"

The rain hadn't yet abated by the time Will stepped back out into the streets, though the muggy lassitude which had hung in the air earlier on had receded. Wind no longer blew noisily over the shingled rooftops, and the downpour had thinned to an almost pleasant, tickling mist. As Will left the Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova and its busy parking lot behind him, he turned down a street that would lead him toward the university.

Will astutely ignored the images that swam above the lurching current of his thoughts. Those which were all of Hannibal, and the way the other had looked at Will with such overwhelming emotion. There was something akin to anxiety buzzing at the back of Will's skull, in a lost pocket of space between vertebra and ligament where his worries wept and hid; coincidence, or probability? Before Will had chance to leave, Hannibal had supplied the reason he was at the hospital to begin with: a former mentor of Hannibal's from Paris now headed a department of the Santa Maria Nuova, and had asked for Hannibal to visit and observe their newest surgeon while he was still in Florence. As for the surgeon in question—well, that just so happened to be one Cordell Doemling.

The circumstances that had brought Hannibal into Cordell's circle of influence were as crude as they were disquieting. Was there something else Hannibal knew of Cordell, that had led Hannibal to not outright dismiss Will? Hannibal hadn't spurned Will away when he claimed to know the truth. Instead, Hannibal had offered him a way to find proof. Of what—he couldn't be fully certain. If the polizia had suspected Cordell at one time, they were likely to have scoured every available avenue in their search for evidence.

But then again, they hadn't connected Cordell to Il Mostro, the most important piece in the puzzle. Perhaps reading the articles through such a lens would spark the conclusion Will so desperately wanted. However, there was always the chance that it wouldn't be enough. And that, more than anything, caused the little amount of food in his stomach to churn and roil.

Cordell *had* to be the Monster of Florence. Will just needed to see the stitching in the design; to conclude, once and for all, that the engulfment he felt in the face of Il Mostro's tableaus was not imagined, or a product of Will's cracking mind. With these thoughts swimming round and round, Will pushed through the crowds on much quicker feet. He knew where the university resided, as it was the same that had hosted the art gala he'd attended with his mother. The very place where he had witnessed the full, provocative scope of *Sacred and Profane Love*. Focused, now, Will would not open that door in his mind where Antonella Migliorini lived. But still, he heard it—the dragging rap of bruised knuckles against the wood, as she begged to be let out with mouth slit open, divested of her tongue and the means to cry out.

The library was housed within one of the oldest buildings on the university campus. Three floors, all filled with an astonishing collection of books. Will was thankful for it being a Sunday; students would be few and far between this late in the afternoon. He wouldn't have

complete privacy, he conceded as he waded through the puddles obscuring the brick below the entrance steps, but surely this would not take long to accomplish.

Much like the elaborate gallery where the gala was held, the grounds around the library were neat and well seen-to; spotted, here and there, with flowers and trimmed hedges. The stonework was pale brown, and the marble floor that led into the wide, open design of the inside was a speckled grey. When Will passed through the double doors, he was arrested by the sight—for looking upward, the balconies of the second and third floor circled above him, their banisters dappled in the sunlight which filtered through the windows along the distant, domed ceiling. It was not as extravagant as the apse within the Norman Chapel, but nevertheless, Will could not help but trace the crisscross of beams that supported the rounded dome.

Though the light from the windows brightened the enclosed space, there were just as many alcoves among the shelves that hid inviting spots of shadow. The windows, too, were mosaic, and cast intricate shapes of color over the marble. Despite the urge to gawk at the library's beauty, Will chose instead to turn toward the nearest staircase. There were signs indicating different groupings of books on the bottom floor, and none of them appeared to be reference-related. Will would have to climb higher, and search around.

As Will ascended the steep, treaded steps, he smoothed his hand along the cool railing. Soon he had reached the top, where he spent some time running his fingers over the spines of books which protruded from the shelves he passed by. In such a space where the air was full with the scents of aged paper and melted wax, he had no trouble flushing the most distasteful of his thoughts from his head.

That all changed, of course, when Will rounded the next shelf and took immediate notice of the soft footfalls following at his back. He had only enough time to swallow before a familiar voice spoke his name.

Will's fingers stopped along the top of a particularly old historical text. He cast a questioning glance over his shoulder, not so much surprised as he was preemptively tired. Given the mood of the morning, and all that had transpired since he'd woken in the garden to cold mud and colder rain, Will did not think himself suitable for polite conversation. Hannibal had been an exception, to be sure. That did not mean Will was eager for more.

The frown Will wore was an unlikely deterrent, in any case, for only a scant few feet away, the boy Will had met at the party in Montespertoli was smiling at him, toothy and bright.

"Anthony Dimmond," the boy reminded when Will did not make any move to answer. "We've met."

Anthony Dimmond was exactly as Will remembered him. Dressed comfortably in a worn coat and scarf, Anthony gave off the appearance of a much older boy. Will suspected him of truly being no more than a year older. Will was nearly thirteen; that would make Anthony around fourteen, thereabouts.

"I remember," Will all but whispered. He could not make himself raise his eyes the last bit of distance to meet Anthony's, and instead looked slightly down and to the side.

Yet, despite Will's closed-off posture, the muted delight in Anthony's voice did not falter. From what Will could see of Anthony's jaw—sharp, though not yet fully defined in his youth—neither had his smile begun to subside.

You're lonely, Will remembered from their time spent together in the forest of Montespertoli. Because Anthony had followed Will to the well; had walked back with him, after, when they returned to the party. And all the while, he had talked endlessly of everything and nothing at all, even when Will had withdrawn into himself under the weight of his revelation concerning Il Mostro. Perhaps Will should be grateful, in a way—without Anthony, he likely would have had difficulty finding his way back. After all, Will hadn't been in the greatest state of mind at the time.

Though now Will had to question if *loneliness* was all that had driven Anthony to follow him.

"I'd hate to be someone worth forgetting," Anthony replied, easy. His English accent curled around his words, low and friendly. "I don't mean to bother you, but I thought you might need help finding something. Are you here for a particular book?" He took a step closer to Will, shortening the gap that separated them, and Will almost felt compelled to take a mirroring step back.

Will did not need a distraction, certainly not now. However, Anthony's help was needed if Will was to continue moving with haste.

Tentatively, Will allowed his lips to widen in something approximating a smile. It was one he often practiced in his bedroom while watching his reflection close; dips in the delicate corners of his mouth where he could deliberately coax dimples to form. "I'm looking for old newspapers," he said, and kept his tone soft, polite. "From last year, actually. Are you familiar with... all this?" Will waved a hand to indicate the entirety of the room.

"I am. In fact, I'm here rather often." Anthony nodded, and at once moved one of his feet back, his body half-turned in the direction Will had come. "I can show you to the archives, if you want."

It wasn't too difficult, falling into step behind Anthony as the other boy led him. Not long after, though, Anthony made sure to slow his gait and walk beside Will instead. As they passed the shelves, and empty chairs and couches where Will imagined students would sequester themselves during the busy weekdays, it was not surprising that Anthony continued to talk.

"My parents know Jeremy Fell," Anthony explained, and performed a small motion with his hand that seemed to indicate himself, and his presence at the library. "They asked him to be a tutor to me, of sorts, for the duration of the semester. Essentially, I'm his assistant, though really the job is *errand boy* in all but name. He has an office in this building, just down that way."

Will was not paying attention, and so did not see where Anthony pointed. Rather, he was intently focused on that name.

Jeremy Fell, Head of Literature.

My compliments to the chef.

Jeremy Fell was the man who had knocked into Hannibal at the gala. The same man whom Hannibal had spoken to, and whom had allowed Will to slip away into the crowd.

He finally caught Anthony's gaze, then; the other boy was a book with pages laid open, one that Will need not strain to pick apart.

"But you admire him," was what came out of Will's mouth, unbidden.

For a moment, surprise cast itself over Anthony's face. His eyebrows ticked up, and he beamed at Will. "That I do. He's written heaps of books on a variety of subjects. It helps in any event, that he thinks of me as somewhat of a son. I hear his actual son, Roman, is busy gallivanting abroad."

They came upon a section of short shelves organized by year and publication.

"Ah. Here we go," Anthony proclaimed, triumphant. "These are the most recent newspapers in our system. The older stuff is eventually stored for use only by special request, but you should be able to find what you're looking for without any trouble. Come find me if you have questions, Will. I'll be around."

He lingered a second longer, just enough time to pass his hand over Will's shoulder as he moved back down the aisle. It was a brief press of fingers, one that hardly could have been called a squeeze. Unimportant, if not for the fact that the place where Anthony had touched was the same where Hannibal's hand had rested an hour before. And for that reason, Will was transfixed by the sight of the other boy's retreating back, until at last he was gone.

Will's shoulder did not quite burn, but the sensation that spread over it was akin to fired clay; the fissures left across the surface when touched, premature. Later, Will would forget the simple act had even happened.

When asked, Hannibal had provided him with a general timespan of months wherein the disappearances of several women were covered in the news. Will started from the beginning, pulling the pages containing meager blurbs where the different women were mentioned.

These did not include pictures, only physical description. *Fair-haired blondes*, each depicted with utmost care. *Slight of figure, quiet, and eyes a blend of woodsmoke and amber whiskey.* None of them had been older than the average university age, though each had disappeared from different parts of Florence. It was their similarities, though, that marked them as a pattern.

This became unquestionably true when Will turned over the two-page spread for the investigation, where he sat on the floor before a large coffee table with multiple stacks of newspapers piled around him. April of last year. Had Il Mostro nearly been caught the previous Spring? The Italian polizia, so declared the article, was hard at work after linking the matching disappearances of the women to a possible serial kidnapper. Two's a coincidence, but three's a pattern—the faces of the young women stared up at Will from the page, all of them candid shots by friends or family, and all of them cropped to bring attention

to the triplet nature of their features. They looked happy in the photos. Hair long and light; a play of light and dark against the coloring of their eyes and brows. In the black and white of the newspapers, Will almost could have believed them the same person.

But you are, aren't you? He had seen that piece of the puzzle for himself, as he had watched Cordell from beyond the glass of the observation room. For in truth, there had been but one woman who Cordell had become obsessed with.

When next Will closed his eyes, he didn't pull the pendulum forth from the fathomless dark. He breathed out, and tried to imagine where Cordell would have met her. The university where they both attended schooling? By that account, they would have known each other over a year ago.

Did it sate you in ways you never knew possible, killing the one you perceived to be your equal?

They are not like her, Will's mind had whispered upon catching that single glimpse. *But they could be immortalized as she was.*

For over an hour, Will studied the article and pictures. And for the first time since leaving the hospital, Will thought of Natalina Mauriot. He did not doubt that Inspector Pazzi was aware of the missing women connected to the Santa Maria Nuova the previous year. But he also did not doubt that Pazzi was astute enough to realize where Natalina Mauriot differed from the three women.

Natalina, who resembled Will's own mother so very uncannily; her brown curls and dewy, pale blue eyes.

Then there were the three women who lay side by side, captured forever in their most fleeting moments above the newspaper article; all of them blondes.

It made Will's mind tremble and invert. Knowing this, and lost to finding reason for why Il Mostro would change now. Why choose the antithesis of the woman he preferred to take, for one who meant something not to Il Mostro, but to *Will*.

More importantly, where were the victims taken? Il Mostro elevated his murders to art, and to reverent beauty that only he could see. None of *these* women were ever found.

Surely this was what Pazzi had meant to show Will. That Natalina's kidnapper was the same as had taken the other women from the hospital, and to find just one body would be enough to bring Cordell back under suspicion. But how, Will wondered, desperate, would he go about doing that?

The last of the afternoon sunlight had long since begun to wane when Will came back to himself beside the coffee table. He gathered the newspapers together and replaced them where he had found them, then, without any more ideas for where he would search next, he resolved to retrace his steps back to the stairs.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” said Anthony Dimmond when Will had rounded the corner that led out into the main aisle. Anthony was slightly flushed in the face, which was ridiculous, considering the other boy still wore his scarf.

“Yes,” Will answered hastily, stepping around Anthony. He sent a swift, parting smile over his shoulder, just the right side of polite. “Thanks. For the help.”

He could not bear to remain here a second longer, let alone under the intense attention of Anthony Dimmond’s eagerness. Was it because they were so alike, that Anthony sought out Will’s friendship so doggedly?

Lost to his thoughts, Will all but ignored the next words which came from Anthony’s mouth; that was, until that hand landed on Will’s shoulder again, and Will whipped his head around before he could stop himself.

Stood there among the old shelves that smelt of parchment and dust, stunned stupid, he was wholly unprepared for Anthony Dimmond to *kiss* him.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Song of this chapter was, without doubt, "Brother" by Matt Corby. :)

There were few things Will didn't understand about love. He'd been given time to learn it, willing or not, aware or left in the dark. Those spans of time were not countless, but finite as they surged up between stretches of self-inflicted solitude, as his broken family of two picked up and left one state for another again and again. Times where, despite circumstance, such a thing as love had reason to grow and fill his chest with its newborn leaves.

Will's first experience of love was for his dad. It was warmth, and felt much like the air did in the thick of Louisiana summers, when the fireflies that passed through the woods behind their house would light tiny fires in the shell of his outstretched hands, and as dusk set in, the deafening heat became known in the sloppy lines of sweat that ran down the backs of his bare calves. Never had that love been more poignant and stubbornly hurting than the last night he and his dad pulled close together over the side of a hospital bed, the sheets stiff and cold in Will's fists as he was comforted and soothed and told to be strong.

He was his father's son. From where else would such a stubborn feeling come?

There was no quantifying love unless you'd loved and lost. Will would not have been able to, in that moment, had it not been for little Hannah years before. She was the only other person whom he had loved, and for that reason their separation was much more painful. His love for her had been warmth too, but of a different kind, wrapped in remembered sensations of burning cold; like the cool linoleum felt through the thin blankets from which he'd built her naptime forts under child-sized tables, or like the sharp chill of the backseat air-conditioning sinking into his sunburnt skin as he and his dad left Tavernier behind and drove north. That was the day he lost Hannah just the same.

Will thought, perhaps, that all love might then burn.

Anthony Dimmond had seen fit to surprise Will. Their lips slotted together, not so much a kiss as it was a pressing together of dry lips. Soft, un-insistent, and brief in their union. It was only as they parted a handful of heartbeats later that Will realized his eyes had fluttered shut. He would have counted the rhythmic swell of his own breaths in his lungs, catching as they slipped down his throat, had he been breathing at all.

Will's mouth had not been completely closed when Anthony leant into his space, and so when the kiss happened, it happened in the imprecise manner that could only be expected of fidgety, startled children. There was a moment, lingering and full with unnamable things,

where Anthony remained far too close, and diverted his mouth so as to breathe out warmly against Will's cheek, their noses nearly nudging.

Will did not quite gape, but his jaw fell slack as he stared at the other boy. Anthony's scarf smelt faintly of laundry detergent. Unlike Will, his eyes were still yet closed, lashes dusted grey in the muted lighting that reached between the bookcases. They trembled, ever so slight, until Anthony opened his eyes and stared back.

There were few things Will didn't understand about love. You kissed the ones you loved, he had thought. His dad use to blow noisy raspberries into the curls above his forehead every night before tucking Will into bed. Twice, Will had attempted to teach Hannah the word in French, only for her to laugh uproariously and vault over his lap to lick the side of his face. Will knew, in practice, that such a gesture could be divorced from emotion born of loving someone else. *So why, then?* he wondered foggily, as they both stared with wide-eyed bewilderment. What made Anthony feel impossibly real, when by all accounts, Will should be feeling nothing?

"I'm—," started Will. It was as though all the air had left his lungs in a rush, and in its stead, negative pressure forced his sternum to warp inward until his ribs creaked and webbed with tiny, fragile cracks.

"Sorry," Anthony hastened to finish, short of breath. He shuffled several steps back, so very red now as heat filled his cheeks and the pinkening tips of his ears hid neatly beneath his combed curls. In the dust and gloom which settled among the shelves of the newspaper archives, Anthony's eyes were a remarkable shade of blue. Though the urge to flee telegraphed itself in every minute twitch of his fingers and face, those eyes did not stray from Will.

After a touch Anthony remarked, steady and somber, "I've been a terrible host." The words came slowly, careful as he parsed through them in an attempt at levity. A corner of his lips hooked up in an abortive half-smile. It fell away not long after, and his throat bobbed on a swallow. "Throwing myself at you. What must you think of me."

Memory pulled at Will, a troublesome itch that clung and stuck; of Montespertoli, and the vain, pompous white feathers of the garden party guests, the bleached corals that had decorated the tables, and the branching prisons they'd made over the caviar bowls. Then there was this: a weathered well that moss and lichen lovingly embraced, and from which the surrounding forest heavied with flowers in the drenched dirt. Anthony Dimmond had found Will there, believing him alone when Will was anything but. For Will's broken mind deconstructed then remade the most distasteful of visions, and in the company of ghosts, was one ever truly alone?

You're lonely, Will had thought. *But you're not like me, and I'm not like you.*

For some time, he had feared this aspect of himself, knowing that the closer he stepped toward the monsters that lived in the dark, the further he moved away from being human himself.

Still. Even monsters could see a beautiful thing and know with certainty that they loved it.

“Not so terribly,” Will replied, soft, and dared not raise his fingers to dig the pads into his bottom lip, as he ached to. What did Anthony see in Will if not a thing worth loving?

When Will’s gaze skittered to the ground and glanced off the curve of Anthony’s shoes, he heard the other boy clear his throat. “I should...,” Anthony began, and his shoes inched another step back, “go.” His hand flexed at his hip, perhaps as much in want of touching his own lips. But before Will could so much as wonder on the way in which they once more mirrored, a rolling sound could be heard down the rows. A shelf ladder, most likely, as it was pushed along one of the far bookcases.

It moved Anthony into action; he began to turn, a measured grimness flitting across his face along with what might have been a twinge of regret.

“Don’t,” Will said suddenly, before the words could be trapped inside him. Frustrated, his brows knitted, and a fine tremor erupted in his knees as he fought not to run. “Don’t go.”

Something of Will’s pain must have shown on his face, for then Anthony lifted his hands, palms slanted forward, loose and open, as if he were comforting a spooked animal rather than another boy—another boy whom he had kissed on the *mouth*.

Will did not know what he was doing. He only knew that Anthony had led him in the right direction once before, if unwitting to the fact. Even the smallest grasp for stability was not beyond him.

“How could I say no?” Anthony smiled, teeth flashing, bright. Then abruptly, he seemed to sober. “This place can get stuffy after a while. If you don’t mind it... would you care to join me for a stroll?”

They left the same way that Will had ventured inside, out through the grand double doors where puddles still wetted the library steps, side by side despite the quietly thoughtful way in which Will would shuffle and stop to glance again at the back of Anthony’s hair. He did not have a name for the feeling that passed between them, even now. It could not have been a kindred thing, or one that marked them as cast from similar molds—Will knew what that felt like, because it was the same that hovered between he and Hannibal when they were together. This was different, and much like the negative space that caused his lungs to seize and hurt, it held the implication of possibility.

There was a small courtyard hidden around the path that led down the front steps. It sat between the library and a neighboring building that Will could only assume held lecture halls. The sallow stonework was darkened from the rain, as was the rich soil that formed the flower beds along the path. They were well-manicured, tidy; towering troves of violet carnations and complementary hosts of lilac. Beyond them, a selection of young cherry trees grew up against the buildings. So early in the spring, they were more branch than bloom. Their sparse, pale pink buds had not yet fully opened, and seeped downward under the added weight of rainwater.

Anthony led Will to the low fountain at the courtyard’s center. It was incredibly wide and filled to the brim with murky green water; another consequence of the downpour, and which smelt faintly of petrichor, metallic and ripe with mildew. Atop a circular daise, water trickled

from a sculpture of overturned marble pots. Each was an aging brown striated with thin, crackling lines of sun-hewn yellow.

When Will walked ahead of Anthony, close enough to glide his fingertips along the water's surface and disturb the patches of debris that floated and swirled there, he was reminded of how they had stood, just like this, in the woods of Montespertoli. For it was exactly how Anthony had found Will: looking down into the expansive darkness of the well where Paola and Antonella were once displayed as he realized the most tender truth of Il Mostro's design.

"I'd hate to pry," came the accented lilt of Anthony's voice as Will slipped his fingers further into the cool water; stretching them, and marveling at the ripples his movements created. "But you make me unreasonably curious. May I ask what brought you here?"

Was it coincidence? Anthony wanted to ask so very desperately.

Like on the train, Will saw a great many things flash in the depths of the pool, preserved and undisturbed but for the ripples that broke apart their likeness. Would the women taken from the hospital have fought and cried? Would they have tried to gouge the skin from Cordell's arms, scratching like animals as they were taken? He saw his own fingers as they had been in the operating theater, painted red from the blood that spilt from beneath his nails and mixed with the water of the fountain.

He breathed in, breathed out. "I know who took those girls," said Will, tired and weighed down with knowing. "The ones in the paper."

Though he did not turn to see Anthony's reaction, there was a subtle note to the other boy's voice which told Will that Anthony was impressed, if baffled by the sharp turn their conversation had taken. This, evidently, was not what Anthony expected. "You sound convinced. Do you have a taste for solving riddles, Will?"

A taste for nightmares that shouldn't be mine, Will refrained from correcting. Instead, he watched the blood from his fingers exude poisonously to cover the whole of the fountain's surface, and whispered, "I had an idea. I trusted it. But now... now I don't know how to prove it."

"I remember," Anthony replied needlessly. He was much closer now, just over Will's shoulder. Will imagined he could feel that warm breath again through the shoulder of his jacket. "Last spring, was it? Dr. Fell spoke briefly of an investigation here at the school. All those students disappearing without a trace. Gone, but not forgotten."

In the shade of the trees and the overcast sky that swallowed all light, the fountain flickered maroon in the ripples that fanned outward from Will's trembling hands. "I wish I could forget," he murmured, more to himself as he shook, "I wish—" He sucked in a breath, and coughed wetly as the blood reached the fountain's edge in a hazy, creeping cloud. There it froze, caught in time for a single moment, before the process reversed itself and picked up speed, tumbling back toward him, and into him.

"Where would a monster keep you comfortable, and safe?" he asked the faces of the blonde women who Cordell had taken, his eyes empty as they appeared to him from the writhing

froth of his mind. Quickly, and all at once, in such a way that made their features blur and conjoin as one.

When they, too, soon faded, Natalina Mauriot rose to take their place. She was the same as the black and white photograph had depicted her, innocent and prurient both, and turned up sweetly into the flash of a camera which lit the place behind Will's eyes with violent white. Where would a monster keep you, Will wondered, if not in the comfort of his stomach?

"Somewhere familiar, perhaps?" Anthony openly pondered. He had ignored the odd manner in which Will had spoken and chose to answer truthfully. "Buried, if he likes irony. Easier to hide, too, I would think. But that's just me."

Signor Doemling had fortunately been forthright with information regarding his youngest son. But there was something he had not told Will; rather, Will had chanced upon a letter, once, that had been addressed to a finely-scripted *Cordell* and left on the foyer mantle while the wax seal sat to dry. It was one of the many letters Signor Doemling would have sent his son in a bid for contact over the years; it was neither the first, nor the last. However, it was the first that Will had heard the name. At the time, Will had been curious enough as he passed through on his way to the kitchens to grab the letter and turn it over.

The letter, in fact, was to be delivered to an address in Fiesole.

What was more familiar to a monster than its home?

"Wait," Anthony started when Will had twisted round and shuffled past him, head down and expression as far away as ever. "Was it something I said... ?"

Anthony's voice did not quite catch, but the vulnerability captured in his tone was no less obvious for it. This, more than anything else, was what brought Will's mind reeling back to the present. There was not much he could offer Anthony, not when Will was running out of time. But maybe an assurance was all that was required of him.

"There's somewhere I need to be," Will allowed, and flicked a hand back to cup Anthony's elbow, a brief exchange of warmth through the other boy's fitted coat before Will finally released him. He resisted the urge to lean closer, and let what might have been a genuine smile curl across his mouth. "You helped me see something important. That's all that really matters."

Before Anthony could manage a reply, Will had already gone. He stood by the fountain where Will left him, a hand half-raised to touch Will back—almost, but never quite—and remained there for some time, silent as a grave.

Fiesole was old. It lay largely undisturbed, appearingly carved out of the hills on which it had been built. Wild overgrowth spilled over into the rough-paved streets and crept up the faded faces of the shingled bakeries and little shops that dotted the lanes. Hedges were allowed to flourish, unmanaged and untrimmed, and weeds filled the cracks in the roads underfoot. There were parts of the town that were homely and well-traveled, noisier for the tourists who

poured from buses most mornings and well into the afternoons, while others were more private and contained clusters of houses with high walls and shuttered windows.

Fiesole was a twenty minute drive from Florence—whose rooftops, rich in hues of red and brown and gaily-yellow, could be seen in the distance, where the streets sloped sharply downward with the curve of the Tuscan hillsides toward the city center. The only thing that marked the divide between town and city were the groves of olive trees that covered the span of land that separated them.

Where Florence was evocative of the history graven into its very structure and architecture, Fiesole held a certain measure of quietude; the product of time, and a far-reaching history lost to the earth, the groves of olive trees that filled the hills with their ghostly, spidery branches, and the vines that ate away at the brickwork of the town's unevenly-spaced homes.

Too involved with finding his answer, Will did not consider the consequences of his actions as he boarded a bus enroute to Fiesole not far from the Palazzo. He had neither the required ticket nor the money on hand to buy one, and so it was rash of him to slip inside on the tail of a boisterous family of tourists, nicking a bus ticket from a wayward pocket as he went. Twenty minutes passed much like an hour might have with Will's heart drumming in his throat. He hadn't the faintest idea whether it was anxiety or anticipation that rattled him so, only that he had never felt so close to his monster than he did now. The sensation was as familiar as an old friend: a disgustingly honeyed taste that ran over the crowns of his teeth, and stuck to the roof of his mouth like sap.

At the bus stop, Will was welcomed by the sight of a loosely-bricked wall that ran alongside the street. Ivy crawled from holes in the misshapen concrete and followed him as he escaped the mingling crowd to wander down into the nearest neighborhood. It was not quite as overcast now, though the sky hung low and light above the trees, washed-out in the way of old bedsheets. He could breathe here, at least, and thought nothing of the chill in the air as he crossed intersections in search of the street name that had been listed in the address.

Not *Via Francesco Poeti*, nor was it *Via Corsica,* or *Via Belvedere*. However, before long a brass, intricately plated sign stood out from the corner of an antique storefront. Will recognized it instantly, and with renewed vigor, he followed it around and into a wide, dead-end street. Where the mismatched stones of the pavement gave way to long grass and wildflowers, a collection of small two-story houses circled the curb. The closest down the lane was a sand-colored affair, red-roofed and quaint and connected to a high wall that hid the backyard from sight. Like the other homes here, it was doubtless expensive for its age and location. Though unlike them, it was also remarkably devoid of personal touch. No furniture sat on the porch beneath the little awning, while the rose bushes lining the flat stones that led up to the steps and the branches of the olive tree that hung over the wall had been trimmed to obsessive perfection.

Will did not need to see the number on the mailbox to know whose house this was. Il Mostro was a perfectionist, after all. Would not his home be an equal match?

The wall that bordered the walk on either side was rather beautiful, all things said; muted yellow brickwork and an enviable craftsmanship that, despite the signs of wear in its cracks and crumbling exterior, made it reminiscent of the places Will remembered from Palermo.

The centuries-old market district, where vendors left out hordes of orange trees in shrub boxes, and tables upon tables of vegetables and fresh fish littered the streets with their spiced and rank smells. There were smaller houses out near the water that fisherman preferred vastly to the crowded, innermost districts of Palermo; their foundations bleached from decades in the open sun, and falling greatly to disrepair.

Cordell Doemling's home was not quite in disrepair, but it had the qualities of one that could only have survived with dedicated upkeep. The white, painted panes on the windows were new, as were several of the boards along the stairs. Replaced recently, surely, to counteract the progression of decay over the years.

Though no one lingered in the streets of this part of town, Will could not ignore the nerves that ate at him. He wasted no time in crossing the short lawn and bounding up the three steps onto the awning, where he reached for the handle of the front door with eager fingers. It was locked, of course. Perhaps it was stupid of him to think this would be easy; snooping around a place he could very likely be caught in the act of trespassing. If Will's clothes were not a dead giveaway that he did not belong here, what a sight he must have been—staring dumbly at the door in plain view of the street. But Will *wasn't* stupid. There was still time before Cordell would be returning home for the evening. And with the weather being what it was, there was a good chance that no one would be outside to notice him about.

He stood there for but a moment longer, and wiped his sweat-slick palms on the hips of his pants before returning back down the steps. He eyed a part of the wall nearest the porch. The same sort of plump, faded vines that grew all over Fiesole and played an integral role in his climbing up and down the balcony of his own bedroom were cut back to the point of uselessness. Now if Will could just find a way to *climb* it... well, it wasn't as though he had time to waste. And short of breaking the lock on the front door, there could be no other possible way inside.

It was a point of no return. So many things could go wrong—was he even sure that he could manage to climb back out? But no. This was everything. And Will only had so little chances left. If he could find evidence that linked Cordell to the disappearances, all Will had to do was bring it back to Inspector Pazzi. Pazzi would believe Will, would praise Will for it, even.

A narrow, two-foot wide space snaked around the side of the house, where the wall butted up against the back of a building that faced out into the next street over. The weeds hidden there weren't visible from the street, and for that reason they grew entirely unchecked. Wading inside the passage was made easier by the nature of Will's size, but the tall grass tugged thickly at his shoes and slowed him down. By then, he had already decided what needed to be done. He hiked his feet up to press against the brick on either side of him, and inched upward in short, careful spurts. By the time he had reached the top, and could push off the grimy shingles of the other building to swing himself over the wall's ledge, he was over ten feet up in the air.

Dropping down on the inside of the yard was less frightening than Will imagined it would be. His vision tunneled, and he let himself fall without stopping to catch his breath, heart skipping as he landed with a low thud on rain-softened dirt. Around him, the yard remained undisturbed, alien in its stillness. A modest garden circled the perimeter of the wall. It was

marked off with smooth stones, and contained predominantly herbs; the dark, glossy leaves of basil and blooming oregano, fine-stemmed silver thyme, and crushed under Will's feet, a carpet of chervil that thickened and thrived like something wild.

There were vegetables too, kept separate in their neat plots. Will marveled at the picture they painted. Plants were always the most colorful directly after the rain, though it also made the musk of their fragrance that much more cloying; ticklish as it entered his nose and mouth and cold where it touched the back of his throat. He wrinkled his nose and slipped, finally, from the bushes, careful of crushing any more of the plants than was necessary to extract himself.

Cordell had been busy. An extensive herb collection meant he cooked often—was it hobby that drove him to garden, or something far more interesting?

Will did not hesitate to enter through the unlocked back door. He was already assured of the fact that Cordell was still at the hospital working; plus, the inside of the house was shadowed, the same stillness that had pervaded the yard leaching now from the floorboards and fixings. The kitchen came first, as it was where Will arrived upon entering. Granite counters glittered from the alcoves under ivory cabinets, while modern appliances in vibrant chrome lined them in perfect, centered rows. It was immaculate, and proved fit enough to rival the kitchen in Hannibal's apartment.

In the cabinets and impressive fridge, Will found Bone China bowls, Waterford Crystal wine glasses, and a well-stocked meat drawer piled with vacuum-sealed packets of salmon and tuna from high-end butchers. Organized, curiously, by date and weight.

It was cool inside the house. The wood floors were as cold as they were polished, and bit uncomfortably at the soles of his feet as he wandered from room to room. He dared not touch anything more than was necessary, and left nothing out of place. This became much harder as Will ventured up the staircase near the front of the house, for it seemed that potted ferns jumped out at him from every corner and bend in the hallway. Not a single one of their luxurious vases could be allowed to topple and shatter.

The master bedroom on the second floor was sparsely furnished. The bed duvet was clean, off-white and devoid of wrinkles, while under it the sheets were fitted to the ends of the mattress in tight hospital corners. This space was, without doubt, the most difficult for Will to intrude upon. It's stillness imbued a different quality than that of the rest of the house—a pull of revulsion that twisted and writhed inside his belly like a particularly worrying warning. The room was deceptive in its plainness and stripped-down practicality; however, the aura of the space was rather the opposite, a powerful feeling, as though no one had set foot here in some time.

Will did not allow himself to stall for long in the doorway. There was nothing under the bed and dresser but dust, and the lone closet held only an abundance of dry-cleaned suits and tidily boxed shoes. It was the bathroom where he discovered an oddity: four bottles of liquid bleach set out on the marble counter, three of them empty. A faint, sumptuous scent ripened the air: a mixture of the fresh soil in the pots littered throughout the house, and beneath that, chemical cleaner traceable to the porcelain claw-foot tub and it's unplugged drain.

To his disappointment, he found nothing else of note in the bathroom cupboards. Perhaps that was for the best; Will's hands and spine quivered as his breathing began to quicken. He forgot, for just a moment, where he was. And in that moment only, his frustration built strong enough to cause unshed tears to dampen the shallow depressions below his eyes and sting the heated skin there. Those tears never fell, but still Will wiped at his face with the sleeve of his jacket and, resigned, gathered himself to his feet again.

Above all, it was the lack of personal effects other than clothing that disquieted Will most. The house was clearly lived in. The stocked fridge and healthy plants were evidence of this. But Cordell Doemling was not like most people—there was a distinct lack of pictures or photograph albums, or even the framed artwork that the most rudimentary of rooms usually contained. That was, until Will found his golden ticket.

A cramped parlor at the foot of the stairs held within it a grand ebony piano that caught Will's attention when he was returning to the ground floor. The cover had been left propped open, and once he'd approached, force of habit brought Will to pluck a string of notes across the keys with one hand. The sound the piano made was light and tinkling, ominous enough that the shock of it hitting the air had Will flinching back. Once more, leaden, the house dropped into silence.

His instinctual step away from the bench put him in the direct line of sight of the vanity placed aside the piano. A framed picture sat atop it, a dull shine to the frame in the half-light that passed through the drawn curtains. Heart beating rabbit-fast, Will wandered close enough to pick the picture up.

She was young. Unfettered happiness painted itself in the scores of her fine features as she turned to glance at the camera over the shoulder of her dress, a wicker basket filled with blossoms cupped against her chest—all of them poppies a blistering shade of red, a few petals of which had dislodged and settled in the curling fold of her wheat-yellow hair.

Looking at her now, *seeing* her finally, Will understood. She was herself, but she was also each of the three women who had been taken from the hospital. Other women, too, most likely. All sharing the privilege of untold becoming, just as they were groomed to fit the accommodating cradle of her mold. Cordell would have thought as much.

She was all of those women, but she was not Natalina Mauriot.

"How do I know you?" murmured Will, so very distant. The welcoming balm of his stream touched the furthest edges of his mind and moved inward to flow around him, bracing where its current sloshed against his ankles, and higher; a sensation, long forgotten, drawn down the backs of his calves. *Real, or not real?*

He did not let the current take him. Instead, he placed the framed photo on the vanity with utmost care, and retraced his steps to the kitchen. The scent of soil and disinfectant tugged at him once more as he circled the island counter to reach the door. Aside the sink was a corded telephone, while above it was a wide window through which Will could see the gnarled roots of the olive tree that grew against the left side of the yard. On the right, opposite, a small tool shed was in plain view of the kitchen.

The window had been left cracked the barest amount. Because of this, a stirring of birdsong filtered inside from the high boughs of the olive tree, where the thicket of leaves grew too dense to identify its source. He found himself leaning forward over the sink to look out into the yard. As his breath fogged the glass, he could almost imagine Cordell stood listening to the same song in this exact spot. Down that path lay darker, more frightening thoughts—the kind that kept Will awake at night with unease at his ability to emphasize and become, in his mind, the killer he tread so dangerously near to.

It surprised him more than could be expressed in words, knowing what he did now about Cordell's domain, and remaining unmoved by all that he saw. Where was that instantaneous connection that Will could not help but seek out, time and again? For even the photograph of the woman that Cordell had cherished most did not add up to what Will already knew about Il Mostro.

The pieces in Will's collection were growing in number. As the jigsaw fit and came together to form the body of a man, it was as though the only spot of unsightly nothingness was where a face should have been.

Where would a monster keep you comfortable, and safe?

Will's eyes slipped down the trunk of the tree until he could run them over the dips in the roots and further, where the meticulous menagerie of herbs grew alongside the wall. Their stark green stalks and long leaves seemingly burst forth from the sun-bleached caulk and concrete. The faded color of the brickwork brought to mind the woman in the parlor photograph, her blonde hair a loving match to that of the three women gone missing the previous year.

The image visited and fled in an instant, so quick that Will had to dizzily blink for a time to clear it from his mind. As he did so, a curious detail struck him. The dirt from which the herbs nearest the shed grew was darker than the rest of the garden; as if newer, recently disturbed. Without a second thought, Will exited out through the kitchen door to get a better look. By the shed, he passed a rust-stained wheelbarrow piled with sacks of soil. It blocked the house from sight when he fell to his knees before a basil bush, and made the smell of fresh earth that much more potent.

The rain had made a mess of the garden bed. Where the dirt was loosest, puddles had formed, brown and stinking of fertilizer. When his palms settled upon the muddied mound beneath the bush, Will took a moment to appreciate the cool moisture hidden in the plant's shadow. No sooner had he closed his eyes, however, memory of his nightmare floated to the surface, and his fingers curled downward. He began to dig, all the while helpless to ignore the imagined taste of Paola Migliorini's heart upon his tongue, a conglomeration of sugar and honeysuckle and rotted flesh that broke down into sludge the moment it met his saliva, only to slither down his esophagus over the sounds of his choking lungs.

Slowly, his motions began to reveal the darkened shape of bone. Hard and unyielding, they protruded from the packed earth and bumped against his scratched knuckles; part of a mangled sternum still attached to several ribs, and deeper down, what might have been an intact tibia and fibula. Now was no place for gentleness, but delicate was all Will could manage as he turned the leg bone over in his hands. Blackened rot hid in its crevices, and

offset the alabaster sheen of its yellowed surface, a sure a sign as any that this kill had not been long in the ground.

The detachment that took hold of Will as he pulled human bones from their resting place was one born of self-preservation. This did not last, for his mind was splintering at its seams. He attempted to stand, only for his feet to twist up beneath him before he tumbled backward into the grass. At the same time, something jostled loose inside him. His vision went black under his eyelids, and with it, the pendulum came crashing down.

I meet her at the university where we share the same class. She is beautiful and headstrong and so stubbornly alive, the first not to shy from my presence, my personality, and my words in a very long time. For that, she draws me inside.

But then I get to know her, and she learns so very much of the thing that I am. For the first time, I have found someone different than the rest of them. I feel she could know me, I see a beautiful thing and it loves me back. My equal, and all that entails.

I wait, and I wait, and opportunity does not arrive in the form that I'd like.

She reacts badly and lashes out, and I am forced to hold on until the life has left her. The feeling is unlike any other. Exhilarating and euphoric, I want more. I will bury her in the garden, where she might nourish the herbs to spice my greatest creations. She will become a part of others as she had been part of me.

I will find more just like her to please the urge and relive that most precious moment. They will not be her, but immortalized, they serve as a reminder of all that she was.

This is my design.

Will came back to himself panting for breath. His elbows ached from his fall, and his throat felt abused and raw. He had not screamed, or yelled; that did not mean he had not croaked hoarsely from his heap on the ground. He lay there a long moment, and breathed.

Cordell had eaten her. Eaten *them*. But not in a way Will could have ever predicted. The implication alone had Will's stomach roiling inside him. He rolled over, pressing himself down into the damp grass and messing his jacket in the muck. As he lifted his forehead from the bend of an elbow, he rose to his knees and crawled toward the wheelbarrow with the intent to stand again.

Only he stopped, frozen in place, at a sound that carried from the kitchen window. It was a static dial-tone, that of the corded phone hanging in the kitchen, followed by the faint beeping of numbers as they were pushed.

A dizzying spell of adrenaline spread to Will's limbs and locked up his joints where he still lay on his belly in the cover of the wheelbarrow. Heart pounding, he dared to peek underneath.

There was a shadowed figure stood at the kitchen window.

Someone was in the house.

"*Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova*," spoke a tinny voice, almost inaudible across the distance of the yard. "*Come posso esserle di aiuto?*"

The phone, Will realized instantly.

Impossible—Cordell could not be here. The afternoon was still young, and he could not have known of Will's presence here... could he?

Will would not wait to find out. Pulling in a long breath of the damp air, he pushed to his hands and feet and sprinted for the olive tree. All rational thought blanked out with the pounding rush of adrenaline in his ears and heart, and he all but vaulted up the trunk as he kicked out for footholds in the warped bark. As he reached the top of the wall through the leaves, he ignored the way the rough branches cut at the skin of his hands and arms, and in less than a minute, he was sliding over the other side of the ledge and plummeting down into the rose bushes on the lawn.

His lungs throbbed in time with the burning scrapes across his face and palms; what surely must have been a mess of bruising, angry red, the most painful of which was a deep gauge that ran across his forehead. Hurriedly, he cast his eyes up to the branches from which he had fallen, and paused—at the sight of his blue ribbon, always around his throat, snagged upon one of the highest boughs.

There was not a second more that he could spare and, not allowing panic to set in as it dearly wanted to, he turned away from the house and ran. Short of tracking down a police station, Will desperately wished he knew how to contact Inspector Pazzi. Because—he'd been *seen*. Though impossible, *improbable*, Cordell had been in the house, and in no world would he have missed Will from the kitchen window. Not when Will had violently burst from behind the shed in his escape. Not only that, but left behind the evidence of his discovery; for the bones of another woman whom Cordell had taken lay out in the open now, exposed to the air from where they had sunken into the earth and slowly turned over with rot.

It was not just the sharp hurt of isolation that plagued Will, unable to call upon Pazzi as he might have once been able to, but the foreboding fear of capture.

By the time Will had boarded a bus back to Florence, the nerve-racking rush that had seized him in Cordell Doemling's yard had bled out of him. In its place, exhaustion steeped and banked inside his chest. Despite the clamor of the other people on the bus, Will nearly drifted off under the sheer weight of the thoughts running circles in his head. It was just as he got off at his stop near the Palazzo that a migraine pulsed against the inner walls of his skull, harsh enough to warrant tired tears to bead in the corners of his eyes.

He did not seek out the Polizia, nor did he immediately return home; instead, Will walked aimlessly toward the Arno, and the same bridge where he had met Hannibal a handful of nights before. It did not soothe the turmoil of his aching mind, but it allowed Will to find peace with the knowledge that he was safe, for now.

If the man in the house had truly been Cordell, what did Will have to fear, if he was still an unknown quantity? *Il Mostro could not know me*, he told himself as he had time and again. He had not wanted to accept it before, not least because of the connection he cherished so much as to take inside of himself and keep safe there, wrapped in warmth. That of Il Mostro's recreations, and how they created in Will a trembling need to be closer. It was dangerous to want this, but even moreso for it to be made truth. Was the fate of the woman Cordell loved most not reason enough to stay away?

Was it not reason enough for Will to turn back, and forget this unrelenting need of his to *see* this clever creature, the monster hid temptingly behind human skin?

Will did not return home until evening was verging into night. Hours after Fiesole, there was little to preoccupy his thoughts from dissolving into flashing images; the kind-eyed, happy woman that Cordell had loved, pivoting round to smile at Will, just as her ribs cracked and burst open, her dress rending down the middle to reveal an outpouring of blistering poppies where her blood should have rightly flowed.

He was not frightened by the emotions the image spawned. Rather, loose-limbed and weary to the bone, Will looked on it with sorrow as much as he did with curiosity. He wondered how Cordell would have killed her. How he would have taken her apart, only to reassemble her in the garden where her pieces better served the soil. *Would you have done it lovingly*, he wanted to ask, *as only an equal deserved?*

In the courtyard of his mother's home, Will resigned himself to climbing the ivy back up to his bedroom and turning in for a restless night. His earlier trepidation had all but fled him, and with only exhaustion in its place, there was nothing more to be done aside from resting his tremulous mind.

However, just as he had made it to the spot beneath his balcony, a light in the distance caught his eye. So late on a Sunday, it was his mother's custom to stay out at one function or another well into the night and early morning. She would not be home at this time, much less hosting any sort of gathering in Will's absence. Which is why the glow reaching into the courtyard from the dining room windows was an anomaly in itself.

Inquisitive despite his fatigue, Will diverted his step in the direction of the doors that would lead into the adjacent hallway. From there, he would be able to distinguish from the muffled voices if his mother was among those dining. A quick look, only, and then he would be gone before anyone could catch him lingering outside.

That did not happen. What did happen, though, as Will slipped inside and crept toward the cracked dining room door, was something far beyond his wildest imaginings.

A myriad of candles cast the expansive room in a seeping, golden gloom. Across the great length of the table, in the same seat where Will had sat at the dinner party the night before, a place had been set. A porcelain, ornate plate lay beside a spread of spoons and forks suiting of a proper and extravagant coursed meal. The same held true for the seats to the right and left, dolled up in elegance that beckoned to be relished. All this was secondary to the man seated at the left.

That was to say, Signor Doemling, gagged and tied to the chair with rope.

Startled, Will did not have the presence of mind to remain still. He had leant far too close, and because of this he did not anticipate flinching, and for the door to creak as a consequence.

There was another person stood inside the room, just aside the chair that had once been Will's. It was the same man Will had seen for the first time that morning at the hospital.

It was Cordell Doemling, and he tilted his head, just so, at the door behind which Will hid.

"Will," spoke Cordell, perfectly calm. "So good of you to finally join us for dinner."

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

*ch 13 edited as of 4.5.2022

Will's eyes glid upward along the dining room table but went no further than its head. Therein, the inverted reflection of Cordell’s smile in the glossy finish tickled uncomfortably at his hindbrain.

He thought it would be different, a lightning strike of clarity, of knowing, upon meeting Cordell Doemling again. A thought that had likewise occured to him that morning at the hospital. For Cordell was, by all appearances, an eccentric creature with as much a predilection for superiority as insolence. The man wore at present a tailored chef’s outfit, chin upturned, repugnantly smug. And disgusted, Will could not bring himself to meet Cordell’s eyes.

Cordell spoke in a tone quaintly prim. “You must be terribly consumed with questions.” That smile widened with equal parts pride and satisfaction, and he clucked his tongue, a soft lisp of sound behind his fat lip that had the fine hairs at Will’s nape prickling. “None fit for polite company, I imagine," the man continued. "Why don’t you take a seat? After all, I’ve gone to so much trouble, and our last dinner guest won’t be long.”

At this, Will took note of the table settings. Two more were arranged before empty seats. There was the head of the table, of course. But as for the one to the right of it—well, there was only one person for whom it could be reserved. That would be Alessandra, perhaps sooner to return home for the night than Will had foolishly presumed.

Behind Cordell, the lit fireplace popped and cracked. Will was not frightened. Rather, his limbs and head were abuzz with white-noise. Because Cordell Doemling had *found* Will, against all sense and rationality.

But how? whispered a pale voice in Will’s head. Had Cordell followed him from Fiesole? How then would Cordell have known to wait here for Will’s return?

There were few choices to be made in that moment, and far less opportunities for escape. That in mind, Will’s feet moved of their own volition, and he circled the table, every step precise. Not once did his eyes leave Cordell's reflection, where guttering candlelight rendered the man in piggish, unflattering shades of pink.

Graciously, Cordell provided a berth just wide enough for Will to sit at the head. Will couldn't put a name to the emotion that carved out a place inside his stomach then, but such

was his apathy that he didn't react when Cordell pulled out the chair for him. Instead, he accepted the offer willingly.

Will sent a fleeting glance to Signor Doemling. Discounting the ropes that bound his chest and arms, Signor Doemling was himself unfit for dining. The butler's head lolled, and there was no recognition in his foggy gaze when it met Will's.

Cordell has drugged his father.

Signor Doemling only ever cared about saving his son, and had suffered as a consequence. Beneath the table, Will clenched his fists to stay his shaking rage.

The face of a truly *vulgar* monster was revealing itself in the candlelit gloom, and it was with no small amount of self-control that he held still as that monster fastened him to the chair. The rope cut into his stomach, his ribs. His left arm was similarly tied; his right, meanwhile, was allowed a pittance of slack, enough to reach his cutlery, his plate, and no more.

Cordell hummed, pleased, and asked, “Comfortable?”

Will refused to rise to the bait. He stared a hole into his plate and steadfastly ignored Signor Doemling’s low, pained moan. Cordell disappeared into the adjoining hall, and not long after, returned with a cart topped in extravagent food. Dinner, it would seem, was served.

“I propose we start the antipasto while we await Madame La Falce. After all, it wouldn't do to have the food go cold.” With a flourish, Cordell deposited in front of Will a bowl of dense, yellow soup. “*Maccu di San Giuseppe*,” the man supplied. “Prepared, in a pinch, with dried fava beans and fennel from my home garden.”

Cordell hovered much too close, an anticipatory hitch in his breath. Will’s skin would've crawled had he not been driven to distraction by the actual words being said. Because Cordell had garnished the dish with herbs from the very garden Will discovered hours before—those nourished by the flesh of every woman Cordell killed. Will closed his eyes against the reminder, sickened, yet powerless but to witness in the dark behind his eyelids the disturbed soil of Cordell’s flowerbeds, writhing with bloated maggots.

“Maccu is a very traditional choice. Many prepare it on Saint Joseph’s day, clearing out the pantry in time for the Spring harvest.”

Out with the old, Will’s mind whispered. He recalled the photograph of the woman with whom Cordell had believed himself in love. Her joyful smile, the welcoming language of her body. *In with the new.* Or rather, the Spring’s coming harvest: all of the other women that Cordell would kill if Will did not stop him.

Elsewhere in the expansive dining room, the repetitive tick of a grandfather clock underscored the quiet. “Not yet feeling your appetite?” Cordell prompted after several long minutes in which Will did nothing but look, listless, at his bowl. It didn't appear to bother the man that neither guest was entirely present for the proceedings. Hands folded at the small of his back, Cordell circled Will. “I thought that might be the case. You see, I’ve heard all about *you*, Will Graham. The things you know, the things you know about me.” At the sound of his

real name, Will came back to himself with a jolt and greedily gulped air. Cordell's smile stretched. "A very curious thing happened to me this afternoon. I received a phone call at the hospital. Nothing quite so untoward, mind you. But as it turned out, the call came from none other than my own residence. Oh, he had a lot to say about you, Will. An anonymous tip, of course. Pity, really. I would have liked to thank him personally."

Will's vision fuzzed at the edges. The shadowed figure which he had glimpsed through Cordell's kitchen window was the same that called the Santa Maria Nuova hospital—to warn Cordell of Will's discovery, even as it happened. Whoever called Cordell had known about Will all this time. Was it another monster, then? One that became attracted to Il Mostro's unrepentant artistry just as Will had?

Cordell's next words were practically sung: "I don't know what game you are playing, Will, and with who. But I find dinner to be a quite satisfying end for you."

You're enjoying this, Will did not say. *You get caught up in it. The debasement, narcissistic indulgence and the unfurling of your superiority. Your selfishness destroys the purity of your design. You think you are killing those women in her image, but in the end, it is your own.*

Where candlelight blotted the table like watercolor upon luxurious cloth, something caught Will's eye in the finish. The nearest candle had spattered the wood with increasing amounts of wax; so, too, had it spattered Will's mirrored image. He saw himself there as he hadn't in what felt so long a time. Shadows contoured the depressions of his eye sockets, areas that had been softer, fuller before this dance with Il Mostro began. What more, his skin was a canvas of cuts and blossoming bruises from his ill-fated climb through the olive tree.

Upon probing with his tongue his nicked bottom lip, Will savored its coppered taste; saccharine, sticky between his teeth.

You're enjoying this, repeated that voice in the deepest confines of his mind. Surreptitous was the uptick in the corner of his reflection's split mouth.

Not once in Cordell's presence had Will experienced that cocktail of foreign thought and emotion he'd grown accustomed to the past many weeks. Emotions he'd been unable to escape as he learned of Il Mostro, as he followed each purposeful puzzle piece his monster left behind. Was this not the very moment Will had dreaded and hoped for? To see his monster's face, and for his monster to see his in return? A familiar itch slithered under his skin. Had that itch been there since Fiesole? Or even longer, simmering since he first gazed upon Cordell in the operating theater?

Il Mostro killed with purpose, delicacy, and a passion for beautiful art, heightening his masterpieces by engineering the becomings of those he found deserving. He honored the ones he chose to remake in a way fitting of the lives they'd lived indecorously. The connection Will had formed to the murders was rawest at its roots, an intimacy felt only in the halls of his oldest memories, where he'd believed the kindred pieces of himself irrecoverably buried. Il Mostro did not know of Will, certainly not as Will had come to know him. But surely Il Mostro didn't need to in order to feel that connection, too?

“How did you find me?” Will murmured, affecting docileness as he so often did for his mother’s waitstaff. For this was the manner expected of a boy his station, education, and age. Many a time, it had gotten him his way, be it an extra biscuit from the kitchen or as minor a triviality as a new book. It created a false veneer: the boy that Will could have been. As well, it led them to underestimate the creature he actually was.

Cordell was conceited, Will was fast learning. Pre-occupied with his apparent victory, the man did not notice Will's deception. “That would be our mutual friend, so helpful as to divulge your home address,” Cordell answered, content to watch Will squirm. “I will admit that I’m impressed. Such a young boy, and quite the detective, figuring out in one day what the polizia haven’t in the span of a year. Perhaps I should pick that brain of yours before I feed you to my garden.” Cordell tilted his head, considering but for a small moment. “Still, there’s always *after*.”

Will looked again to Signor Doemling, who must have been aware, in some way, of what was transpiring. “And my butler?” Wiill asked, cautious of allowing any emotion to leak through. “Why him?” Whatever happened—Will would not stand to see Signor Doemling hurt. Cordell was an exemplary sociopath; it would not be prudent of Will to show such a weakness, let alone one so easy to exploit. Because now it was startlingly apparent that Cordell had no qualms about killing Signor Doemling. That was why both he and Will were present for dinner, after all.

Cordell had been waiting for this question, for at its utterance, he became almost giddy with delight. His cheeks plumped around a sinister grin, and caused the meager light to create briefly in his blackened irises gauges of deep, glistening ruby. “Ah, but you would not have found me were it not for your butler. That is how you tracked my good work back to me, is it not? He said something about me. How else would a boy as naive as yourself make such pivotal leaps of logic?”

Naivety, Will mused, was less becoming of him than it was Cordell. That was where any similarity between them ended, for Will realized now that this was a new beast he was dealing with entirely. Detestable, above all. Cordell did not know Will, nor did he *see* him. Slowly but surely, his stream came to flood his thoughts, coaxing his heels forward. Will allowed it to envelope him for one minute, then two, and came to the conclusion his subconscious hadn’t wanted him to reach.

Where the itch burned, it suddenly, abruptly inverted and chilled. Nothing could stop it from sinking into his bones.

For this was an undeniable truth: Cordell Doemling was not Il Mostro.

“Now then,” Cordell continued, unbothered, and unaware of the whisperings that only Will could hear where he stood knee-deep in the tumbling current of his mind. With a tilt of his head, Cordell brought attention once more to the bowl of soup growing cold on Will’s plate. “I encourage you to eat. As the guest of honor, it would be rude not to.”

A momentary blankness came over Will, then it receded along with the soothing sensation of his stream, and he returned to the dining room. His mask was too easy a fit, sliding back into place a second time; with it, he sweetened his voice and put upon the air of the perfect little

boy. Disarming, and charmingly beguiling. With his free hand, Will smoothed the corner of his napkin, drawing Cordell's attention with that motion alone.

"I know you, Cordell," Will said in earnest. "Your father told me about you because I reminded him of you. His youngest son, always alone but for good reason. Did you ever hear of a wolf befriending the sheep? Not you. You were superior in every way. *They* were the animals." Calm, Will turned a small smile up at him, dimpled and childish. "Is that what he told you, the man on the phone? Did he tell you how I knew? I know because I am just like you."

We are alike, you and I, Inspector Pazzi had said.

Will's jaw tightened at the memory, molars creaking in-sync with the elevating beat of his heart. *Liar, liar.*

The expression Cordell wore now was one of gobsmacked surprise. Comprehension, and in its wings... appreciation. This, Will knew, was symptomatic of every monster that humanity feared. They hoped to be understood, but far more than that, they hoped to find their equal. Another like them that lived and felt as they did. And Cordell was as susceptible to that honey trap as any other.

Will imagined it, then. That black-feathered thing, opening its maw in panting pantomime of a grin. The drool that spilled from its tongue was oil, viscid and thick, iridescent in passing. A slow-dripping seepage, the sound was strangely soothing, and stilled his fidgeting fingers atop the arms of his chair.

Tell me, Will, hissed the creeping blackness as it engulfed the halls of his fragmenting mind*,* so familiar in its warmth*, what hunger are you feeling now?*

"Untie me, please?" Will beseeched. The lull to his cadence was innocent, trusting; a manifestation of the monster he had grown too close to and could no longer separate from himself. "A meal like this should be enjoyed to its fullest. I want to enjoy every part of her as she deserves."

He watched Cordell intently. The good doctor was curious, darkly so, though most shocking of all was the confusion that briefly colored Cordell's countenance. Stronger than that, however, was the starved gratification that rose to replace it. Will's fervor was enough to convince Cordell of his honesty. To be seen finally, after so many years, was too potent a proposal to pass up. Who could be so strong as to resist that closeness, sharing in a meal between like-minded animals?

Cordell stepped forward then, reaching for the knot securing Will to his seat. Only, in a fraction of a second, even less, Will had jerked up, fast, and locked his teeth into the nearest part of Cordell in reach—this being the index finger of the man's right hand, which crunched as Will bit down. A crack reverberated upward through his skull, before he was shoved back into the chair with such force that Cordell's finger soundly tore at the base.

Blood gushed hotly to fill Will's mouth. A subverbal growl all but broke his ribs to claw its way out, bubbling up wetly around the severed appendage. He spat it without ceremony into

the soup bowl, where it splashed across the yellowed froth, an insult smeared in impassioned red.

Cordell clutched his wounded hand to his breast. “You... little...” the man wheezed through great, wretched heaves, *“beast.”*

When Will bared his teeth, the blood raced in rivulets down his chin. A display that provoked Cordell into nigh feral a sneer. The man grabbed the largest knife from the table with his profusely bleeding hand, positioning himself above the winged seatback of Will’s chair. Will did not attempt to move away, nor fight. To do so would be cowardice, and resigned to his fate, Will licked up what blood he could from his lips, blinking sluggish, almost sleepily up at Cordell.

A crash sounded through the far wall of the dining room, the thud of heavy footsteps close on its heels. Will didn't glance toward the door when it burst open; neither did he react when Inspector Pazzi called out, “Polizia! Hands in the air!”

But the knife didn't falter in its descent, and so Will did the only thing he could think to do—he rocked sideways with the sum of his weight, toppling the chair and Cordell along with it. The knife clattered to the ground. Snarling, Cordell went after it with fumbling, blood-soaked hands. So crazed was Cordell in his rage that he did not hear Pazzi cross the dining room. That was, until the moment the knife met with the inspector’s boot and skid a ways over the marble floor. Cordell spluttered and attempted to roll out of the way, but was stopped, finally, by the muzzle of Pazzi's gun.

“Cordell Doemling, I presume?” Pazzi's eyes flicked from Signor Doemling to Will. Then, in a tone colder than Will had thought possible of him, he stated, “You are under arrest.”

Later, Will would not be able to recount what happened immediately after. More polizia stormed into the dining room, handcuffing Cordell and escorting him away. Eventually, though, Pazzi lifted Will into his arms and carried him outside, whereupon entering the courtyard, Pazzi settled him onto the ledge of the central fountain.

The courtyard was a blur of activity as people moved between the dining room and the back-alley entrance gate. There, flashing lights could be seen bouncing off the brick from the street. Men and women with cameras were busy photographing the grotesque scene inside, and already, paramedics had stretchered Signor Doemling out.

Will bent to hide his face in his lap, attempting to block out the noises around him as best he could. A three foot gap separated him from where Inspector Pazzi perched also on the ledge. Subconscious, he started to rub the thumb of one hand along the crease between thumb and index finger of his other. Perhaps it was shock that kept him silent, or perhaps it was something more. He was oversensitive to the things he saw and heard, and hunched inward on himself as the blackness again threatened to consume his mind. Catatonic with numbness,

he sat and said nothing. Until finally, that silence was broken by Pazzi rather unsubtly clearing his throat.

Will snatched a glimpse of the inspector from his peripheral vision. Pazzi's shoulders slumped with the exhaustion of ten men combined, but his features, while softened in their weariness, were deeply contemplative.

“You have not asked how I knew,” Pazzi prompted, solemn. When Will remained unresponsive, the inspector sighed.

Had Will truly never seen Pazzi in uniform? The austerity of it surprised him, as did Pazzi's continued softness despite it. Beneath the overbright courtyard floodlights, Pazzi’s age showed in the spidery wrinkles fanning outward from his eyes and mouth. The circumstances of the night had taken their toll on all parties involved. Inspector Pazzi was no different; at the end of the night, Pazzi could have easily passed for a man twenty years his senior. For it, his overt gentleness in handling Will were admirable.

“For some time, I had worried for you, Will. How close you were becoming to Il Mostro, the chance of the wrong person noticing. I was right in that, though I wish I had not been.” Pazzi’s accent thickened in his tiredness. He attempted a smile then, thin and brittle as it may have been. “Do you remember the phone number I gave to you the first time that we met? It led to a protected line, one of my own, that I change regularly for security purposes. You were the only one I knew to have access to it, and so it was natural that I assume it to be you when a call came through late this afternoon.”

Pazzi looked out over the other polizia as they worked. He scratched at his beard, scruffier than Will was used to seeing on him.

“The man who greeted me over the phone had a voice I could not place,” Pazzi went on, “though the familiarity with which he spoke to me ate at me as time went on. He had called from Fiesole, from the residence of Dr. Cordell Doemling. According to this man, he was the friend of a boy I might know: Will Graham. Then he gave his address, expressed that he would not part ways without leaving behind a gift for my troubles, and hung up.” And here, Pazzi’s voice lowered by a half measure. “It was only after that I realized the man with whom I had spoken was Il Mostro. I had no choice but to go to Fiesole, all the while dreading that it would be you who I found there, made into the final brushstroke of another of Il Mostro’s masterful paintings. What we found was a body in pieces, but one belonging to a young woman. She had been dug up from the yard before our arrival and laid out in the shed for us to stumble upon. Her decomposing limbs were strung together with satin ribbon. I immediately identified the image she represented from my research: Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus*.”

A third artist, and another depiction of the goddess. Will knew it well from lessons under Bernard’s tutelage.

To Giorgione, Bernard had instructed, *the curves of the recumbent woman’s body were synonymous to the rolling landscape that he painted around her, natural and organic. She lies naked, one arm raised to open herself in what most would read sensuality, but with a*

dreaminess about her face and the language of her body lacking of invitation or incitement, she denotes not the act of love but the recollection of it.

The corners of Will's lips were stained with blood when he turned his face up in the light. "...Venus?" Said so softly, it was not a question meant for Pazzi, but for himself.

Il Mostro's first Venus, Antonella Migliorini, had been shamed for loving wrongly and selfishly. While Cordell was the one to send this second Venus to the earth, killed her and buried her, Il Mostro had chosen to give the earth back to her—through the intention Giorgione had instilled into the original *Sleeping Venus*—and in doing so, Il Mostro elevated the unknown woman's demise to something meaningfully beautiful. An act that was almost kind, if not serving of its own purpose: bringing attention to two vastly different designs. That of Cordell, and Il Mostro.

Do you see me now? The *Sleeping Venus* in the shed would have asked Will, had she the jaw bone to do so, rather than the strings of blackened flesh that still clung to the parts of her Il Mostro had stitched whole again.

"The evidence is not yet conclusive on a DNA match," Pazzi said. "But I have my suspicions that she is our missing woman, Natalina Mauriot. I did not discover until we moved her some time later that a small brooch had been hidden in the folds of the fabric she lay upon. It was inlaid with the La Falce family crest, the same you yourself carried. I knew Il Mostro meant to imply your home, and so I did what was necessary to be here in time."

They sat together for a time, until Pazzi retrieved a hankerchief from the pocket of his jacket, dipping it into the water at their backs before handing it over to Will. Though neither spoke, the inspector hooked a knuckle in a circular motion about his own mouth, gesturing where Will need clean.

Damp, the cloth was a welcome balm against Will's heated skin, and for several minutes, Will scrubbed at his face with it. Once the blood was gone, however, Will nearly startled at the way Pazzi was watching him. The inspector's mien of contemplation had returned tenfold. Uncharacteristic was the clarity with which Pazzi now studied Will, as though an important detail was finally slotting into place; an epiphany, of knowing, and seeing what had always been there to be seen.

"Were you?" Will asked at length. "In time?"

"I cannot be the one to say," murmured Pazzi, slow. "I do not think I could be honest with myself."

Will squeezed the cloth hard between his hands. And his attention slid behind himself, to where the fountain gurgled, hushed. "You lied, before. You lied about being in Palermo."

"You see through all that matters, Will," Pazzi admitted with a defeated shake of his head. "Some time before I met you, I was on the trail of a young man whom I had suspected to be Il Mostro. You recall that first day in the Uffizi when we ran into each other rather literally, yes? I came to see the *Primavera*, and the same man who sat, every day, to draw it. Hannibal Lecter. You met him that day, too. And to my great surprise, befriended him. I had made a

habit of staking out Lecter's apartment. The morning you and he left for Palermo, I was at the street corner waiting. I already knew of Natalina Mauriot then, and my suspicion of Lecter led me to follow you, so as to catch you alone and speak as I returned you to Florence."

The cloth slipped, limp, from Will's senseless fingers. It hit the water, sending tiny ripples shivering outward. Will croaked, "You thought that *Hannibal..."*

Pazzi grimaced, chagrin apparent. "I must ask you to forgive me. Cordell Doemling will not hurt you any further. It does not make up for the things that I have done, but I hope that it will keep you safe."

"Cordell," repeated Will distantly.

But Cordell Doemling was not Il Mostro.

The tint to Pazzi's smile, now, was apologetic. "The Monster of Florence. Were it not for you, Will, we would not have found the right man. To think, I would never have had the pleasure of seeing my monster caught."

But Will was no longer listening. A record caught on its needle, his mind scratched and reversed.

I came to see the Primavera*, and the same man who sat, every day, to draw it.*

That day in Palermo, Inspector Pazzi found Will waiting in the chapel.

There is something else I wanted to show you here, Hannibal had crooned, baited breath stirring the curls at Will's ear. The memory came back to him in flashes of white and sparkling gold; this was how Will remembered it, and had cherished it ever since. *The surprise is more than the Norman chapel—it is also what lies beneath it.*

I did not think you were ready, before.

But now...

It felt as though his heart had crawled up into his throat. His lungs ceased to function, and at once, Will was transported back inside of the dining room, the tight buckles of his restraints scouring deep indentations into his ribcage as he struggled to breathe.

He stood up violently, dodging Pazzi's hand as the inspector reached out to him. When Will finally broke into a run, he was thinking of everything and then nothing. Nothing at all.

It was the earliest hours of the morning by the time Will arrived in Palermo. He was profoundly lucky to have boarded the last train leaving Florence that night; even moreso, for he managed to slip into the luggage car unnoticed. Wedged between suitcases in a

windowless corner, the trip was a monotonous one. But this served Will just as well; he would not have survived the cacophony of the crowded passenger cars. Alone, and with only the company of the thoughts rising up like a tide in his head, Will could close his eyes and let it all melt away.

And, as Will walked between the emptied pews of the Norman Chapel, as he roved discerning eyes over the murals in the arches overhead, he had half a mind that the ceiling would give way. That it would open to a frightening darkness, yawning into eternity. Not a single soul inhabited the chapel so late into the night. He had no trouble finding the entrance to the catacombs that led underneath the grand rooms and halls of the Cappella Palatina and Palazzo Reale, and as he descended the stairs, he was careful to measure his footholds atop the uneven stone and dust-caked brick. The streetlights which poured through the windows of the upper floors faded at his back. Shuddering against the draft, Will continued on. The catacombs were so obviously unfrequented, but oddly enough, collections of half-melted candles burned along every corridor he passed, and they guided him through the musty, encompassing dark.

At a fork in the tunnel, those candles lured him left, where it opened to a cavernous antechamber. Sconces dotted the walls with muted orange light, secondary to the woman who lay in a spillage of hair and stunning drapery in the center of the floor.

She lay just as the *Primavera* victims had in the bed of the pickup truck: posed horizontally, on her back in a nest of seafoam foil and unpatterned, rich blue linen. The depth of her expression was sonorous, head canted toward her shoulder and over the naked span of her body, only the vee of her crooked arm to hide the swell of her unbound breasts. Compellingly innocent, she was model-like; a square jaw and wide eyes captured in a moment of singular lucidity, as though she had opened herself before a camera, and all it took was the click of the shutter to keep her stuck in time forever. In her other hand, she held the curled end of her voluminous dark hair tucked against her belly's soft underside, where it covered her groin and ran down the supple curvature of her thighs.

Will was drawn to the shimmer of the foil in the dimness. It depended on the angle in which he looked, how the colors interacted, glinting around her prone form: brilliant streaks of silver and jade and every shade of the variegated sea.

Last was the concave, wire sculpture of a shell beneath her feet. It was equal parts copper and aluminum, textured with papier-mâché and pepperings of black paint like ocean spray.

She was everything the *Birth of Venus* was meant to be.

She was also Natalina Mauriot. The unquestionable breath of her beauty, lost and now found.

Across from Will and opposite this display, a shadow detached from the wall of a neighboring tunnel. It moved into the light and revealed itself in the sharply-defined hollows and shallow plains of Hannibal's striking visage. He wore his Belstaff leather jacket, and despite the utter coolness of his face—unemotive, slack—his movements were imbued with a perceptible, revelatory anticipation.

When Will looked to Hannibal over Natalina's body, he marveled briefly at Hannibal's eyes, reflective as a fox's in the murky cast of the room. Had Will forgotten how red they were, or was it a trick of the light?

For far too long, neither moved to speak. Then, rapt, Hannibal said into the quiet, "You suspected."

A laugh bubbled up, hot and swelling, inside Will's chest. When it hit the air, it was wooden, halting. "I didn't suspect," he replied, tasting each word as it rolled from his tongue. "I knew."

That moment stood in the woods of Montespertoli, when the scent of the leaf litter, damp with mildew and sodden debris, had accentuated the fragrant foxglove with fetid decay. And where Will, transfixed with the knowledge of the sturgeon that were prematurely gutted for their eggs, had gazed down into the abandoned well and seen Il Mostro's victims there—harvested and then eaten, an act far more intoxicating to his monster than sordid luxury. Will had known then, hadn't he?

The gala. *The braised tongue*.

Will recalled just how Hannibal had stared at him as he partook of the catering, and gave in to the shiver that crept down his spine. Had Will consumed Antonella's tongue that night, delightfully unknowing?

I understand the flavor can be hard to bring out in such a dish.

That stare in his memory bled into the now; the dual-images converged upon each other, and for but a moment he saw Hannibal dressed in the suit he'd worn to the gala, the vertical cuts of black and white that had followed the smooth lines of Hannibal's body now writhing, snake-like, in the jumping firelight.

Natalina lay open at Will's feet, birth and rebirth conjoined. What did it say about Will, that he did not wish to look away? It was as though he were mesmerized, wholly and unalterably. "This is a gift," Will whispered, and felt a sharp prickling at the roots of his gums. Parched, his tongue grew suddenly, inexplicably dry. He swallowed. "Hannibal. You did this for me?"

You fed Paola's heart to me that night. The answer had been there, always. And throughout it all, Will had not once let himself believe it, or think it true beyond the depth of what he felt when in Hannibal's company, far down beneath the layered shrouds that kept the parts of himself he feared as monstrous suppressed and hidden. But inevitably, they somehow managed to claw their way upward, vicious and hideous, *triumphant*, haunting him in the oppressive way of nightmares. Had it really been only this morning that Will had dreamed of the Norman Chapel, and awoken in his mother's garden shaking with fevered confusion and an uncomfortable elation light in his chest?

Half for you, half for me, Hannibal had said over their dinner. The image was a brightly burning beacon in his mind: the pickup truck beneath the swallowing darkness of the chapel, Paola's heart beating in his hands as it rent down the middle.

“For you?” Hannibal murmured. “No. But to show you—it felt right.”

Will opened his mouth, paused there a while. Then: “It felt good, killing her. Didn’t it?”

A ghost of a smile tugged pleasingly at the corners of Hannibal’s mouth, and his lidded, half-moon eyes darkened incredibly so. The turn of Hannibal’s words became heady, honeyed. “Some would say killing feels good even to God. He does it all the time.”

A shudder swept through Will, but he did not let it overwhelm him. The things he ached to acknowledge were escaping into the air, and one by one, the pieces of the puzzle that formed Il Mostro were consolidating and becoming real. Swallowing back on the surprise that stirred within him, Will looked again to Natalina, and studied her as he thought back to what Inspector Pazzi had said of her on the train.

“She was rude,” said Will, remembering, “like the professors. Ruder.”

The first time the pendulum swung behind Will’s eyes, he had found the newspaper article that detailed the *Primavera* murders. He’d made his deductions, then, about Il Mostro’s preferences for manners, after which he had relayed this finding to Pazzi. The professors made to inhabit Chloris and Zephyrus had been unspeakably rude. The same could be said, surely, of Natalina Mauriot in whatever capacity that Hannibal had met her. Hannibal would have run into her at the hospital, if he wasn’t the one to see to her in the first place. A coincidence that just so happened to overlap with the women Cordell also had taken from the Santa Maria Nuova. How very easy it was, to see one monster and not two.

Going by what Will had learned, Il Mostro’s victims had always been chosen in couples, though not necessarily the romantic norm. The professors were a married set, and Antonella —she had fallen in love with her sister, after all.

Natalina was the first to be taken alone. However, the question still stood: why the couples at all? Was it jealousy, Will wondered, that Hannibal felt in his intimate study of them, and thus sought to cauterize and expunge in the process of their becoming? To care for someone else, know them and feel for them, and be cared for in return?

A short distance away from Will, Hannibal watched him with remarkable intent. Mouth parted slightly, his stillness suggested he dared not even breathe.

You are lonely.

Low though Hannibal spoke, his rumbling voice rang out: “Then in your eyes she was found deserving.” There was a question in that, tentative and tenuous beyond expression.

A familiar itch kindled anew beneath Will’s skin as he traced the swirling colors of the *Birth of Venus*. “In yours, and in...” *Mine,* Will did not say, but it hung there, just the same.

Unsaid, it found a home in amongst his organs and slid further south. A part of Will now, it was as instrumental to his functioning body as his swift-beating heart.

Chapter 14

Abruptly feeling as though he were suffocating, Will closed his eyes against the reality of the catacombs in which he stood. However, it was not the blissful reprieve of darkness that greeted him behind his eyelids, but a vision most bittersweet, steeping sluggishly outward from the flung-open doors in his mind: that of the very space within the Uffizi where the *Primavera* was held, and where Will had once met a young man on the bench set before its luminous display. Brought forth now, the radiance of the gallery was buttery, warm and distinctly unfocused. Its details were delineated by distraction, fading in the painting's presence even as, like liquid apricot and sunshine, the paint on the walls began to melt and make dripping lines alongside the *Primavera*'s lacquered frame.

Taken with the *Primavera* again as he had been then, Will's eyes danced from figure to figure before sinking into the forest that shrouded them; the deep black of the trees, wild where their leaves grew past the seams of the frame, and the dottings of orange flowers and fruit which tempted Will closer still. Then the paint began to sink from the faces of the gathered nymphs, from Venus, and from Chloris and Zephyrus, too. In its stead, the *Primavera* was rendered in the careful graphite markings of Hannibal's practiced hand. Only now, a perfect study of Will's face was depicted in Chloris' place.

By that same hand, Will's expression was drawn in such a way that it couldn't be interpreted as anything other than knowing and open, as the Will in the painting gazed up longingly at Zephyrus—the west wind, whose own face was obscured by the feathers of his dark wings as he swooped down to catch the boy beneath him.

"Real, not real," Will mumbled as he stared, transfixed, at the beast's great wings. He stepped forward until he was nearly nose to nose with the *Primavera,* and his feet slipped into the chilled puddle of paint which had pooled at the base of the wall and squelched between his toes, ripe with the stench of epoxy.

That smell was soon replaced with a familiar copper undertone. And it was in that next moment, just as Will had raised slow fingers to trace the outline of Zephyrus' newly-rendered form, that the monster from his nightmares, feathered and antlered and emaciated, made itself known in the touch of a snout at the back of his other hand. Before it pulled away once more, it heaved a prolonged breath into his skin, frightening him from his stupor and sending him careening backwards.

He hit the ground almost in slow motion, but still his eyes squeezed instinctively shut, and as the gallery winked out of sight, so too did the *Primavera*. His fall was broken by a startling softness. Lids fluttering open, he found himself staring up into an impenetrable void the likes of which he associated with the woods inside his mind. It did not soothe him as he had hoped; rather, the unbearable chill of the paint had crawled upwards his hips and chest, migrating to blanket the entirety of his body, and he could no longer bring himself to move.

"Will, is that you?" husked a hoarse voice, low and whining like rusted-over drainage pipes.

Gentle, Will turned his head into the bedding. To his right, lying beside him in the shimmering foil and linen, was Natalina Mauriot, her head turned to watch him back. Though her skin was sunken and chalk-white, her eyes were the same pale blue Will remembered from her photograph.

Cold to the bone, Will's teeth chattered behind a thin smile. And perfectly in-sync, she smiled back.

Like looking in a mirror, Will thought, increasingly lethargic. Unbidden, he recalled the twisting arms of the bleached coral which had decorated the party in Montespertoli, and the way he and Anthony had acted so uncomfortably alike.

Are we not so different, you and I?

It felt like forever when he slowly began to reach out to her, and pressed his fingers to her cheek as he hadn't been able to touch the *Primavera*. The skin tore beneath the pressure, easy like damp tissue, the flesh that spilled out from beneath curdled and maggot-white. But even so, at the same time, Natalina had reached out to do the same to him. On his own cheek, the touch of her fingertips was as rough and painful as sandpaper, and the proximity of her skin smelt sharply of salt and the sea.

He knew then, staring at her and her staring back, that Natalina Mauriot was never meant to look like Alessandra. She had always been meant to look like Will.

Her lips opened, then, and she wheezed, *"Will."*

He was thrown back to that room deep inside the catacombs the next instant, heart unsteady, though it seemed not a moment of time had gone by save for the passing exhalation of his breath. When Will opened his eyes, there was something newly born hiding behind them, and he gazed once more upon Natalina Mauriot's corpse, several days dead, set into Il Mostro's transfiguration of the *Birth of Venus*.

Across this display, Hannibal wore a mask of yearnful patience, one that softened the sharpness of his face in the flickering firelight, and made him appear more boyish, younger and raw, than Will could ever recall. The stillness of Hannibal's body was uniquely inhuman, but now, almost awkward where it fit into the space around him. Not exactly out of place, but telling, nevertheless; it was taking every ounce of Hannibal's control to remain so.

Swallowing what little spit had gathered around his tongue, Will wetted the roof of his mouth and asked, "Why did you do it?"

There was a perceptible, incremental cant to Hannibal's head as he absorbed with utmost care each word that Will spoke.

"I saw you in Cordell's kitchen," Will hurried to clarify. "You called him, then you called the polizia."

Was it just a game to you? Will feared asking. *A manipulation, and to only your benefit?*

Silent an overlong moment, Hannibal utilized the same care in the words that he spoke. “I believed you ready when I brought you here just yesterday,” he began, quiet and compulsively cogent, “only, my hand was stayed by our dear inspector, Pazzi, and the next I saw you in the operating theater, I thought you had deduced my secret from the information he would have given you regarding Natalina Mauriot’s disappearance. What a remarkable blessing Cordell Doemling proved to be, as well as your insistence that he was the monster the polizia hunted. I knew immediately that I could use him to benefit my ends, and assure myself that you were as ready as I had initially hoped.”

There was movement then, purposeful, as Hannibal reached into a pocket of his jacket, pulling it back out to reveal a slip of blue ribbon woven between his fingers. The way Hannibal held it was strange; pleased by its presence and the very fact of its capture, evidenced plainly in the simmering amusement that colored his countenance at the turn of it in his hand. *Will’s ribbon*, the very same that he lost during his escape from Cordell’s garden.

“You surprised me in more ways than one,” Hannibal admitted, stroking the ribbon with his thumb. “I did not anticipate seeing you there in the garden. Cunning, clever boy.”

Hadn’t Hannibal been the one to plant the La Falce crest in amongst the folds of the *Sleeping Venus?* To lead Pazzi to Will, and with a window of time just large enough to interrupt Cordell’s dinner? It had been a gamble. Hannibal had been so *sure*—so convinced that Will’s nature would invert and claw its way to the surface. All Will had needed was a little push.

If this... this *becoming*... was not just Natalina’s, but a shape of Will’s to come, they were twins in that way. Both rebirthed, born of tender affection for artist and subject. Though Natalina wasn’t the subject, but a character meant to honor, just as the *Primavera* victims before her. And whom did she represent, if not Will in all that mattered?

The hallways in Will’s mind were falling to disarray, and the realization—of everything—was viler than the bile rising in his throat. He could taste the phantom splurge of blood between his teeth like he was back in his mother’s dining room, Cordell’s meaty finger stuffing his mouth incredibly full. And he *hated* it, wishing, with all his being, that he was more human than monster.

“Tell me,” breathed out Hannibal. His accent had grown considerably thicker, catching round his consonants. “What are you thinking now, Will?”

“I can’t,” Will whimpered, and took a shaking step back. “Everything’s... changing.” He knew he sounded smaller than he had in a very long time; almost the boy he should have been. Even now, the stream that flowed out from his subconscious was growing choppy with discontent, rising up the muddied banks and making bending paths through the trees. Any more violent and it would drag him under, much like the instances in which Will had looked into another face and the levy had broken as he *saw* them and all that they were, hollowing himself out in the process.

“You have a memory palace, the same as I,” Hannibal observed at some length, pausing as his dark eyes studied Will and teemed with conviction. But that phrase, odd though it was—*memory palace*—was said with such stunned adoration that Will believed he’d imagined it.

“It’s... filling with new things.” Then, hushed, “Do you think that it now shares rooms with my own?”

Will did not panic. Instead, he did his best to slow his breathing, savoring each gulp of air that managed to enter his lungs. He didn’t answer, and turned, fast, to run.

Within seconds, a hand had clamped around his wrist. It squeezed once, and held him there for several heartbeats. And in that time, Will forced himself to meet Hannibal’s eyes. They gazed at each other for an endless moment in which neither breathed; a sliver of white peeked from beneath Hannibal’s parted lip, and that small detail alone was enough to remind Will of Hannibal’s crooked-toothed smile that night in his apartment. The image, cast in sweet striations of gold, stopped Will from struggling or pulling away.

Not a second longer, and Hannibal’s hold was loosening. Before it was gone completely, however, Hannibal swept his thumb up the underside of Will’s wrist as he was wont to do with the corners of his sketchbook. “Forgive me,” Hannibal murmured in parting, then released Will. Strands of his neat, ashen hair had become displaced from his bangs, falling into his eyes and shadowing them further.

Was Will losing time? How then was it possible for Hannibal to have moved so fast?

Something heavy lingered in the air between them as Hannibal watched him. After a beat, Hannibal asked lowly, “May I take you home?”

May I, the monster behind the garden wall had asked the two sisters, the politest among men. *May I, May I.*

When Will’s dad used to read the story of *The Garden Wall* to him as a child, his dad had expressed a certain empathy for the monster that the younger sister had allowed to slither inside. Even before knowing the story’s ending, and the truth of what the monster really was —an envoy between the sisters and the family that they had lost—it had appeared a grotesque, horrible thing. The detail struck Will as important, as much as he wished to not think it: the idea that his dad had been just the same as he.

Will’s mind was throbbing through his skull as it rearranged itself. He couldn’t be here. He couldn’t be here with—

Please, he thought desperately, knowing, in some part of his mind, that his earnest, animal need would show through.

“Please,” was all Will could say aloud. He trembled. “Hannibal.”

The openness that had rent across Hannibal’s expression shuttered slightly, what would have been a simple twitch on anyone else but on Hannibal meant so much more. A measured acceptance found a home in the flat line of his mouth and smooth, unaffected brow, so meticulous as to be obsessive in its restraint. Will was not quite sure what he would have done had he seen hurt there, instead.

It had not occurred to Hannibal—not until that moment, caught up in the similarities that they shared—that Will could be afraid.

On the floor behind Hannibal, Natalina Mauriot stared, unseeing, into the wide room. The gentled gravitas of her features was heightened by her elegance, and though it sickened Will to see her there, prone and made vulnerable even in her beauty, he almost expected her to turn her head up at him; grinning, invitingly innocent, in the hazy, hungry gloom.

By the time Will made it out of the catacombs and into the street, his vision was spinning with black and the faraway glimmer of stars overhead. He hadn't realized that his feet had been moving at all, nor did he remember his ascent from the dank dark aside from the faintest, blurring impressions.

Neither did he realize, until hours later, that Hannibal had let him go.

A curious phenomenon marked the passage of time, after, as Will travelled back to his mother's home in Florence. His mindscape had always been something of an inner world, one characterized by rustling, starved shapes and the absence of light, expanding, onward and outward forever. There were two creatures that lived there: himself, when he dared to dream, and the *other,* feathered and dripping with oil and plaque. Like the Zephyrus in the painting who reached for Chloris, to grasp and to own, this particular monster ached to possess him. Or at least, that's what he'd long come to believe.

Once, Will had feared its presence and the fervor with which it chased him. Whereas now, he recognized in it his neglect. In truth, only one creature inhabited his mind, and that was Will himself. When had it happened, he wondered, that he'd split that self in two? The more distasteful of his halves had been buried in his subconscious, left to spoil and perish, the part of himself that he wished to hide and not know—*See?* it continued to ask Will, panting for breath. *See?*

All this time, and it was the one commonality that always helped Will discover the truth, even when he didn't wish to know it. All this time, and Will had only needed to see as it saw.

See? came the same whisper in the air as the feathered stag appeared to him now, down a far-reaching, arched hallway that never seemed to end. Stood at one end, Will could do nothing but watch, in mind's eye, as it paced away from him on clicking hooves and turned into an open doorway on the left.

Despite himself, Will was powerless not to follow. He rounded the corner and stepped inside. The stag was losing feathers, spilling them in its wake; they graced the marble floor in precise cuts of black. Once he'd entered that room, however, they disappeared underfoot; in place of them, the glossed hardwood gave way to leaf litter. And for a singular moment, he was back in Montespertoli.

Hannibal would have handled the sisters with the delicacy necessitated of religious artifacts. Will could see it, perfectly envisioned: crisp shirt sleeves rolled neatly to the junctures of his elbows, tie loosened and collar unbuttoned a single stitch. Hannibal wore latex gloves as he

dragged Paola and Antonella Migliorini from their car—which was abandoned, and pushed into the woods long after Hannibal had followed them in his own, a rental, and flagged them down.

It was tedious work, drawing each body first through the sodden dirt and stripping them of their clothes. The pieces of the sisters that he wished to keep would have been already excised, painstakingly quick, when their blood was still yet warm, after which they were kept fresh in a cooler in the car trunk while Hannibal worked.

Will circled the scene as it unraveled, noting the reverence with which Hannibal positioned the sisters atop the well in the semi-dark. So late, the coolness of the damp left behind from the recent rains kept their bodies safe from swift decay. Meanwhile, Hannibal lovingly threaded pre-cut branches through their hands and supple abdomens, angling them like puppets upon their stage.

Around both Hannibal and Will, the shadowed trees vibrated with insects. It was another sense memory, one that eagerly overlapped this vision of Montespertoli and doubled back—molten, and thick like a layer of condensation on Will's skin, the buzzing of cicadas characteristic of his summers in the south filled the woods.

Once done, Hannibal retrieved his suit jacket where it hung from the branch of a tree at the edge of the clearing. A dissonant note rang jarringly through Will's head as he watched. It was the jacket that Hannibal left behind that night in the garden, which Will later grew accustomed to pressing his face into, clinging to it while he slept as though it were a buoy and his nightmares a tumbling, angered current. The muted scent of *forest* had soaked every thread, and to Will, it'd been a comfort that smelled of home. Pine needles, and the sticky gooiness of sap.

It was almost too difficult to consider how a simple thing as that slipped past Will the night Hannibal came calling. The night Hannibal murdered Paola and Antonella Migliorini was the same that Hannibal had come to return *The Garden Wall* to Will from beneath his balcony window. Il Mostro had known even then the story of the two precocious sisters, one careless and the other not. This was no longer a question of *how*, or *why*—in killing Paola and Antonella, Hannibal was speaking not only to the tale of the sisters in the book, but to the one person who understood and cherished it most. This was a question of morality.

As much as the knowledge invigorated and incited Will, there was still that aspect of himself which turned over, nauseous, with dread and horror.

Whether by Hannibal's hand or Il Mostro's, lives were taken and consumed. The thought did not upset Will's stomach as it had the first he'd dreamed of it; partaking of the sisters' flesh, unawares. What did it say about Will, that he was far more bothered by the cruelty of Hannibal's manipulation of him?

An indeterminable number of hours later found Will navigating the Florence streets that led back to the La Falce home. His return to Florence was easier the second time around. Will's mind distanced itself from his body, and for a time, he could almost convince himself that he was dozing. But the truth of the visions that accumulated behind his eyes still stood, no

matter how he wanted to fight them. All he knew in the present moment was that it was morning, or an early variation of it. The neighborhood would be just beginning to wake.

What did Inspector Pazzi tell Alessandra when she finally returned to the crime scene Will had left behind? It was an arbitrary worry, hollow for all that Will's skull pulsed warningly under the weight of everything that had happened since. More importantly, he was discomforted by the image of Natalina that sprang up, fully formed, at the thought of his mother.

The courtyard was silent when Will entered it from the alley gate. The morning was a wash of grey, sparse sunlight filling the spaces not obstructed by the architecture of the surrounding rooftops. Will passed the center fountain as he made for his bedroom balcony. So undisturbed was the water and surrounding air, it was as if he and Pazzi had not sat at the fountain's edge and spoken of such grave, damnable things there the previous evening.

Now, the fountain lay unmoving, and around it, the bushes bore wilted, weeping flowers.

When Will crossed the last bit of distance to his balcony, he hesitated a moment over the state of his clothes and face—he had cleaned the dried blood from his mouth during the train ride to Palermo, but there had been nothing to do for the stains that had bloomed upon his shirt collar. Without even his ever-present ribbon to hide these from sight, Will would do best to change his clothes before he could be discovered. Signor Doemling was likely still at the hospital, or wherever else the polizia may have taken him for medical attention. That meant Will would be in the clear as soon as he made it up to the balcony.

This, unfortunately, never came to pass. The moment he climbed over the balustrade and slipped inside his bedroom, the set of doors that led into the adjoining room from the outside hall opened, and in marched none other than—

Monsieur Lefebvre?

Will's tutor wore a disheveled charcoal suit and carried his briefcase in one hand, a frown etched into the wideset corners of his thin-lipped mouth. At the sight, recognition fell over Will. Today was *Monday,* a tutoring day. Had no one told Monsieur Lefebvre of what transpired here last night?

The man looked harried as he walked over to the table and set his briefcase down. This was the room Will normally took his lessons in, minimally furnished with Will's harpsichord and a table for his worksheets and arts. Between these stretched a small, unlit fireplace that mostly went unused, visible from Will's bed when the door that connected the two rooms lay open as it was now. As well, this allowed for Will to see Lefebvre before the man could see him.

Displeasure well-apparent, Monsieur Lefebvre tossed his gaze around the drawing room until finally it caught on Will through the doorway. The man's frown twisted disdainfully, and curt, he motioned Will over with a quick flick of his hand.

"Bonjour, little master," Lefebvre said, idly but not outright irritated. "I am afraid our lesson is to begin late today. Your butler did not see fit to answer the door when I rang, though

eventually I was let in by a passing maid. No matter, I am sure I will be speaking to Madame about this later."

Despite Monsieur Lefebvre having not acted outwardly volatile since the first day Will snuck out to visit the Uffizi, Will was not one to take chances. He did not wish to contradict Lefebvre, but then again, there were few excuses the man would accept or care for.

I was held hostage by a serial killer in the dining room last night would not have had the desired effect. That said, Will knew he would not be able to sit through a single lesson today nor anytime in the foreseeable future, least of all if that lesson was with Monsieur Lefebvre.

"But—," Will started, hesitating where he stood a few feet inside the drawing room. Subtly, he attempted to adjust his jacket to cover his shirt, where Cordell's blood had dripped down his chin and spotted the white. It was worse at his collar, of course, and the buttons beneath his throat. Lefebvre was a stupid, piggish man—would it be too much to hope that he did not see?

"Sit down," Monsieur Lefebvre interrupted immediately, and waved a hand at one of the table chairs. His eyes were turned down to the contents of his briefcase while he continued to rifle through them.

It was unfortunate, then, that no sooner had Will approached the table that Monsieur Lefebvre was sniffing in moderate distaste. There Lefebvre paused a moment, grey eyes jumping up to skim Will's face, and his attention caught on the blots of red that wreathed Will's neck.

Will had looked into Monsieur Lefebvre's eyes, once, and seen all that warranted seeing. That had been the previous Spring, when upon escaping the dutiful watch of a kitchen maid, Will trudged through the flower beds in search of a little bird he sought to capture. The bird escaped in a far more permanent manner. As for Will, he was returned to his rooms for a change of clothes just as Monsieur Lefebvre arrived for lessons. Will knew few undisclosed facts about Lefebvre at that point in time—as Will was prone to learn from *all* his tutors—but it wasn't until he witnessed the look that passed over Lefebvre's face as the maid rolled Will's muddied pant legs up to his knees that Will learned much, much more.

Just as they had back then, in the present, Monsieur Lefebvre's hands twitched forward and stopped. The exact look passed again over his face; improper and instinctually desirous. Lefebvre saw his own daughter in Will by association—scuffed knees and the discolored stain of blood. The daughter he so very enjoyed shoving to the ground, in fact, that any child would work as substitute if he could get away with it. Monsieur Lefebvre couldn't be *too* greedy, after all.

Seeing the blood that lightly speckled Will's collar was enough to set the man down that path. Monsieur Lefebvre believed himself intelligent, but he was as susceptible to capture as any garden-variety bird. Was it wise to goad the man further if this was Will's chance to catch a second monster?

"Another tumble in the garden?" Monsieur Lefebvre asked, voice unsteady as he regained his composure.

There was a dated intercom in Will's bedroom on a desk near the bed that the maids used to speak with the downstairs staff while cleaning. There was one in just about every room of the house.

"I need to…," said Will, distracted, and rose from his chair to cross back into the bedroom. Though Will could not turn around, no doubt Lefebvre's silence was one of surprise.

That was, until Will entered the bedroom, and proceeded to calmly allow his knees to buckle into a trip. Out of Lefebvre's line of sight, he manipulated his fall so as to bear most of his weight on his palms rather than his knees, thus it was controlled and more painless than his tutor would ascertain.

"Are you...hurt?" Monsieur Lefebvre asked, behind Will now. A hand took hold of Will's arm below the elbow and hooked inward hard. The pain of it was quickly forgotten when Will was hauled to his feet. He expected the irritation and confusion; he did not expect, however, for Monsieur Lefebvre to keep holding onto his arm.

Lefebvre's expression swiftly distanced itself, and there was renewed calculation in the flick of his eyes down Will's body that was entirely telling. The hold tightened, and those fingernails curled inward to the point of burning.

Do it, the darkness within Will coaxed.

The intercom remained out of reach, but perhaps if Will could wiggle loose...

The burn of Monsieur Lefebvre's fingers grew harsher. And unhesitating, Lefebvre shoved Will back down to the floor. From afar, it would have looked as though the man had simply let go and gravity did the rest. But Will knew, and he gazed up at Lefebvre with that knowledge bright in the whites of his sclera.

Lefebvre's expression was still distant as he looked down at Will, but also remotely considering in a way that made Will's skin prickle and the hair at the back of his nape rise to stand on end. The shove had hurt sharply where his knees hit the hardwood floor; a sort of lingering pain that zinged down his legs. Will's second mistake came the next moment, when he pushed himself to his feet and turned his back on Monsieur Lefebvre, who grabbed onto him again, much more violently. As Lefebvre considered Will, he must have come to the conclusion that Will had hoped for—Will was an easy target, and who would believe a child over a Frenchman as respected as he?

Will schooled his expression to one of passiveness and boredom; not a far cry from the truth, when the threat Monsieur Lefebvre posed paled in comparison to that of Cordell Doemling the night before. If Will had intended to goad Lefebvre closer to violence, this did the trick and more. Those greedy fingers turned into claws that tightened hard enough to bruise. Only this time, Will was not immediately pushed away.

Above him, Lefebvre grew very still, the quality of it prey-like rather than predator.

Slowly, Will turned his chin up to see over his own shoulder. At his back, where he'd left the balcony doors open in the sallow morning sunlight, Hannibal stood before the balustrade with

arms relaxed at his sides, watching Monsieur Lefebvre.

The body's response to violent stimulus can often be quite beautiful, murmured Hannibal's lulling voice through Will's mind, scratching softly like dried leaves over marble-floored hallways. How had Hannibal reacted that time in the gallery, seeing the purpling bruises Lefebvre imparted on Will's skin? By some manner of foreboding, it was as if the temperature in the bedroom had dropped suddenly downward. *Adrenaline, oxytocin. We advance ourselves to limits defined only by cause and effect, our reactions to the actions of others.*

The edges of Will's vision began to blacken and encroach. He could not be sure who moved first—Hannibal, or Lefebvre. One moment they were on competing sides of the room, then the next found Will brusquely thrown to the bed while Monsieur Lefebvre was sent crashing to the floor. Sideways, and shoulders first, the whiplash had Lefebvre's skull cracking audibly against the unforgiving hardwood.

When the man got to his knees, shaking and flinching, he struggled into a crawl toward the drawing room. Will had just the presence of mind to push himself up on his elbows atop the duvet. Once there, he searched out Hannibal's eyes and met them in short fashion, for Hannibal was regarding Will from where he'd positioned himself between the bed and Lefebvre.

Those eyes were empty and black. Stripped of their color, they were also strikingly cold.

The link between their gazes broke seconds after at the sound of a low, agonized moan. Monsieur Lefebvre had made it into the drawing room, but to what end? There was nowhere he could go that Hannibal would not find him.

Attention at once drawn away, Hannibal stalked into the adjoining room, reached down to pick up Monsieur Lefebvre by the ankles, and pulled the man's knees out from under him. He then roughly dragged Lefebvre's body the rest of the distance to the fireplace, where Lefebvre was left to choke on strangled whimpers.

Hannibal circled around the grate and picked up a poker, tossing it up to spin in the air before catching it.

Blinking muzzily, Monsieur Lefebvre rose to sit back on his legs. The man's cheap tie was loose and knocked askew, and the round glasses normally perched on his pointed nose lay shattered on the floor.

"How long have you thought of fighting back, Will?" Hannibal mused. "Did you imagine it would be quick?"

Hannibal swung and knocked Lefebvre forward. The poker connected with the back of the man's head, its crack seemingly reverberating off the walls. That sound, and no other, would haunt Will forever.

From his bed, Will saw everything as it happened, and still he did nothing to stop it. His heart skipped and shuddered, straining forward in such a way that Will imagined he could feel each

individual rib as it beat inside his chest. The blackness swirling around his vision had not abated, but worsened, pounding in time with his frantic heart. The crack of Lefebvre's skull heightened once it entered his own, flashing across his mindscape and the hallways that continued to shoot up around his thoughts like a jigsaw. He saw the professors laid out across the rusted-red truck bed. He saw the orange and white poppies and fronded leaves that poured from the pick-up's lowered hatch, and he saw Chloris' skin, white with the stale pallor of rigor mortis, start to weave with fissures before shattering as beautifully as porcelain.

"Are you scared, Will?" Hannibal asked, indistinct for all that he sounded much closer; too close, in fact. Gentle caresses smoothed down the sides of Will's face, weighted, and yet deftly careful as those hands came to frame his cheeks. His head was full of cotton. Where was Will? Far away, was that rumbling, canorous cadence directed at him?

Chloris and the pick-up faded from view, hushed like the susurration of waves up seaside cliffs, and as they receded, Will felt warmth pass over his head, once and then again.

Hannibal, thought Will, sluggish.

"Will."

He returned to the bedroom in unrushed increments, little spasms rushing to the ends of his toes and fingertips. He was on the bed as he'd been when his vision blacked out, but unlike then, Hannibal now knelt beside the bed and leant over Will's chest and head.

The expression scoured deep into Hannibal's handsome visage was patently stricken. There was concern there, too, bubbling anxiously beneath the surface where Hannibal likely thought Will could not see it, or no longer had the presence of mind to care to hide.

But it didn't change anything. There was no more denying what Hannibal was.

"You were dissociating," Hannibal said eventually, after countless minutes had passed. Warmth made another pass over Will's hair, what Will now recognized as Hannibal's hand, brushing the curls from his face. "I need... I need to know that you are not afraid."

Hannibal never faltered in his speech. Where his words trailed and hung, worry dwelt. It was more obvious in this moment than any previous that such an emotion was alien to Hannibal and not something he could easily control—if he wanted to control it at all. How frightening that must have been for someone like him, who was so used to perfection of person and mind. It went the way of every other emotion that Hannibal felt for Will. At first feral, blown-open and liable to violence paradoxical in its vulnerability, and when Hannibal finally acclimated to their presence, those confused emotions married and affixed themselves into something palpably, overwhelmingly possessive.

Hannibal had not let Will go. He followed Will home for the same reason that he protected Will from Monsieur Lefebvre. He *couldn't* let Will go.

The bed dipped minutely with the shift of Hannibal's weight as he leant further down. However, just as it appeared that Hannibal would press his nose to Will's cheek, he redirected himself, and instead pushed his forehead into the duvet scant inches away.

They breathed for some time. Then, calm, Will lifted a hand to urge Hannibal away. That did not happen; rather, weak, Will could do little more than leave his hand flat against Hannibal's chest. He was shocked to discover how fast Hannibal's heartbeat fluttered beneath.

What else had Will missed along the way?

Letting Hannibal take charge was the easiest thing in the world. The scent of copper was ripe and thick, and so Will did his best to shut his eyes, willing it all to disappear. With reluctance, Hannibal removed himself from Will's space, and set about ridding the room of the evidence of Monsieur Lefebvre's untimely death. Will could not say how; eyes closed, he did not realize he'd drifted off into the welcoming pull of near-sleep until Hannibal was waking him with a shake.

They didn't speak. Disquieted by everything and nothing, Will allowed Hannibal to usher him outside—taking the stairs this time, thankfully without any house staff around to spot them. And soon, they were miles away, on the elevator that led up to Hannibal's apartment.

The click of Winston's nails as the front door opened was an echo of the hooves Will heard in his nightmares, but the lighting in the apartment was kinder than Will remembered it. By the time Winston came careening around the kitchen corner, the shadows had all but dissipated from his vision and thoughts. He crouched to envelop the dog in a hug, holding onto as much fur as he possibly could while Winston nosed at Will's chin and licked happily at the small smile forming along his mouth. He did not laugh as he had his last visit, all too aware of Hannibal looming behind him. A curious thing, for Hannibal had not moved from the doorway after entering.

Ignoring Hannibal's presence, Will walked with Winston through the dining room and into the sitting area, tracking the curios in the glass cabinets he passed with uneasiness pooling in his gut. He thought the pressed butterfly wings pretty, once upon a time. Now they only brought up memory of the hospital, himself caught behind glass as Hannibal stared out at him from the sterile operating room.

Hannibal disposed of Monsieur Lefebvre's body in some form or another—would anyone be able to link the tutor's disappearance back to Will? Would Inspector Pazzi come around again, or would not even Monsieur Lefebvre's family report him missing? Abusive fathers were often abusive husbands. Was it wrong that Will hoped for them to be happy?

Will took a seat in the nearest of the two armchairs and curled his arms tight around his knees. After a while, Winston grew bored with Will's somber mood and padded back down the hall, leaving Will alone to his heavy-lidded staring.

I need to know that you are not afraid.

It was not long before Hannibal joined him. The woven red of the sweater that Hannibal wore was painted soft in the glow, and like in the catacombs the fringe of his bangs had become displaced, fallen into his eyes. Though this was different, out of comfort and not a loss of control.

“My beloved colleague, Signor Winston, had a mishap earlier today,” Hannibal said, quiet. This was the first Hannibal had spoken since Will surfaced from his anxiety attack. The hesitance held in each word was strange. “My teacups were a matching set.” He carried a thin tray in his hands. A single, off-white porcelain teacup rested atop it. “However now, I fear I only have the one to offer you.”

Winston chose that moment to butt up against Hannibal’s thigh and circle around them to look at Will, his tail flicking, just once, as he listened to them speak.

Telegraphing his movements more than perhaps necessary, Hannibal handed the teacup down to Will’s waiting hands. It was pleasantly warm between Will’s palms. And more so on his tongue—fragrant, and just a touch sweet.

“May I see?” Will murmured over his cup, when several moments had passed and Hannibal lingered.

Obliging, Hannibal returned with the tiny fragments in an empty, floral tea tin. He even retrieved a tub of glue when it was requested.

Will picked at the pieces that he spread out on the coffee table, knees tucked beneath its lip. It took some time to find the right shapes, and carefully fit two pieces that finally slotted together. To fix it completely would take hours, and more of the same attentive care.

Hannibal watched this from a measured distance away. His smile, when it appeared, was quick to come and go. It never quite reached his eyes.

“Perfetto,” Hannibal whispered.

Chapter 15

It was night when Will awoke. As his mind gathered itself together again, twisting patterns of smoke rose and disintegrated in turn behind his eyelids. The soft give of sheets beneath and around him—of blankets, cushioning his limbs and back—began to gradually rouse him from sleep. Where his fabricated inner-hallways had fragmented, a leaking sepia hue slipped through the cracks at a leisurely pace.

He was not laid out beside Natalina Mauriot in an abstract sea, nor ankle-deep in mud near a lost well in Montespertoli. He did not think that he was dreaming; neither did he think that he was truly alone. Fractured, his mind was drawn back to that moment, that memory that wasn't a memory, where he'd reached to Natalina and she reached back, and as his eyes opened, the same unknowable darkness soaked through the low roof that sloped overhead; as well, the rafters and wooden beams which dribbled with black in overeager plops.

Will saw feathers first. They sunk down toward him from the creeping seepage, even as it expanded as black sangria might, fabric blotted with wine. Then came the steady reveal of antlers, their sharpened tines and shiny curves garlanded in ochre twine. However, where the shadows jumped and parted, it was not the head of the stag that followed close behind them, but something markedly different. Though black as the surrounding night, it appeared human.

Zephyrus, the biting wind of March.

Not animal, and not man, but rather another sort of monster somewhere in between. Purged of recognizable features, its smooth face and white, unseeing eyes looked at Will, and through him. That gaze hit the back of his skull, and he shivered and worried at its eerie familiarity. It was a face he simultaneously knew and didn't know, warped until its diluted shape haunted him. A draft pushed through the rafters, and as Zephyrus slowly descended, its feathers did not ruffle or shift, for the god's limbs and drooping wings hung at angles most unnatural, stiff as taxidermy. Still, indulgence slid along its thin lips and pulled at its taut skin like safety-pins.

Just as the stag lost feathers in the hallway of Will's mind, several dislodged now from Zephyrus' wings and fluttered downward. In the sepia cast of the space around Will, they flashed fiery orange before curling finally into flower petals that settled atop the blankets. A single petal hit Will's cheek, and rather than tickle the skin there, it itched like a re-opened wound.

Moments later, Zephyrus was gone—the roof and intersecting, weathered rafters were left empty, and where the darkness receded, they became shaded in the deep blues characteristic of the earliest hours before dawn. An important piece of his mind found its rightful place again, and finally, Will sat up in the tangle of warm bedding. He discovered the flower petals, too, had disappeared.

The mattress beneath him was a simple, soft thing. Frameless, and stained from age, it sat in the back corner of a narrow stall, the kind horses were kept in—but from the look of it, the

cobweb-filled beams and musty, hard-packed floor, no animal had set foot here in many years. Though stagnant and quiet, the air stung at his face the longer that Will remained free of the blankets. Despite this, there was no relief from the sweat gathered in the spaces between his toes and armpits, and beneath the curls of hair at his nape.

He realized then that he'd fallen asleep in an armchair inside Hannibal's apartment, and now was unsure of just where he'd woken. A telling headache formed behind his eyes. He'd slept for a very long time. All he remembered was finishing the tea that Hannibal made for him, and after, growing too drowsy to keep his eyes open. A pool of viscous, lethargic liquid stretched forward to submerge his feet, while in the background, the apartment had faded into nothing.

He noticed a lantern beside the mattress, its wire frame bent around an infinitesimally small ember on its final breath. Had it been Hannibal who left the lantern lit at Will's side while he slept, the same as it had been Hannibal to deposit Will here—to remain sweat-warmed and safe throughout the chilly night?

There was a matchbox on the ground nearby. Will wrapped the thickest of the scratchy blankets over his shoulders and plucked a single match from inside. Struck, and held carefully between his cupped hands, it was enough to rekindle the lantern's tiny flame. Light bloomed up the stall's high walls in an arc of malnourished yellow. Will almost expected the ghastly shape of Zephyrus to appear along its edges. Irrationally fearful, he would not allow himself to look up.

Not much came of it when Will shined the lantern around the stall, and so he set it down, stirring up dust as he did. Another draft pressed against him and he shuddered—that, at least, was not something he'd imagined. His jacket was missing to his dismay, but he still wore the same shirt and pants as he had the day before.

At his back, the light bobbed up the walls. A scratching sound could be heard beyond the stall, clicking almost like the stag had along varnished, glass-like marble; faint at first, then very much not. Will tucked himself into the corner, blankets clutched around himself, and bit his lip hard enough to draw blood. He watched the cracked doorway with trepidation burning the lining of his belly to ash, until finally—

Winston poked his head through the crack. The door creaked as he panted, tongue rolling out to slide over his nose. *Like leaves in fall*, Will had once described Winston's fur, thinking back to the house he shared with his dad in New Orleans, the crunch of dead leaves underfoot as his dad chased him. Only now he found that descriptor rather lacking, for in the lantern light, Winston's fur shone like burnished gold.

"Hey boy," Will coaxed, impossibly gentle as he offered his hand out for the dog to scent. It was more than worth it when Winston crawled up onto the mattress and breathed hot dog breath all over Will's hands and face and throat, and finally, snuffling loudly at Will's ear; playful despite the hour. They had not spent much time together since they met, less since Hannibal agreed to take care of Winston. But a dog never forgot, or so it was said. Will believed it, too.

“Do you know where we are?” Will whispered, once Winston had settled down enough to nose around the lantern and matches, tail at attention. As Will spoke, however, the dog’s head shot up, cocking quizzically. His tail wagged once, twice. How funny a thing, Will thought, to be reminded of Hannibal’s peculiar predilection for tilting his head just *so*. Though for Hannibal, this quirk was less out of confusion as Winston’s was, and more out of calculation and amusement.

Thoughts of Hannibal led to thoughts of Monsieur Lefebvre, the man shuddering as he pulled himself on hands and knees through smears of his own blood, and that, Will decided, was not something he was prepared to address. An afterimage of bright red, gushing and running like malaligned rivulets down his vision, seared itself into his retinas, and for a long moment, it pulsed out at him from wherever he looked—be it the rotted patches in the roof, or the distorted shapes of his and Winston’s shadows on the far wall.

Will stood up just as Winston ran out through the stall opening, and reluctantly he grabbed the lantern and followed after. There were several more stalls like this one in different states of disrepair. The three opposite had been crushed by a displaced beam and lay half in ruin. This was much the course for the rest of the space: littered with broken glass, long-dead machinery, and dried out hay. As he approached the entrance, Winston began digging at one of the overlarge doors with a whine.

As it turned out, only one of these doors was not rusted shut. It rolled along its track in spurts until Will could squeeze through. Immediately, he was blindsided by the peppering of snow that covered the ground and surrounding woods. The last snow he had seen was in Paris several months prior to his coming to Florence. This snow was a *spring* snow, one that powdered the sprouts of green leaves and flowers with translucent white, and brought with it the last lingering remembrance of the winter temperatures gone by. In the perilous haze of near-twilight, it appeared at once unreal, half-living and half-dead, barren trees with scraggly, fair-budded branches.

These trees were reminiscent of the forest that dwelt far inside Will’s unconscious, a thought that discomforted him more than it should have, and ripped at the tenuous, temporary ties at the seams of his mind. *Am I dreaming?* he could not help but wonder. *If Winston is here, how could I be?*

The trees were thick and twisted here, with a stillness about them that spoke of a quiet not often broken nor meant to be. Behind Will, the barn from which he’d emerged nearly towered over them, and bore a much blacker silhouette against the sky. His worry sunk like a heavy stone inside his belly, becoming mangled, muddled with the lingering fear of nightmares. What if Will *was* dreaming? The covetous god, Zephyrus, attempted to reach for him and failed. That did not mean it wouldn’t try again.

Will tightened the blanket around his shoulders and rubbed at his numbed nose. Meanwhile Winston trotted ahead, his legs sinking to the hock in the undisturbed snow.

In the distance, a house could be seen through the trees, its white walls visible even in the diminished light. This was exaggerated by the cast of Will’s lantern, the haze of morning made thicker wherever the lantern passed it over. This alone was enough to alleviate the anxious turn of Will’s thoughts—never in all his dreaming had he encountered as much.

He did not have to travel far to reach it, not once glancing back over his shoulder as he walked. Even in the dark, the slanted trees gave way to the path he desired. And he took his time, sidestepping the overgrown brush and decaying logs he came across, as well as the steep inclines where someone less mindful would have likely tumbled.

Before he arrived at the house, however, he was surprised to find a clearing not far off. Like the house, it was enclosed within a black iron fence taken over by dried-out, petrified vines. The styling of the gate was elegant and almost Victorian, with embellishments the deepest black shaped into fat, lush leaves and flared feathers. It was enough to draw Will's attention, and bring forth a series of still-images to flicker through his mindscape: Chloris as she'd been remade by Il Mostro, gazing emptily upward from the truckbed as her mouth opened and foxglove poured out, the bloated blue-skinned Zephyrus beside her, skin peeling away to reveal inky pinions in its wake. And lastly Will's monster, the feathered stag, struggling for breath on the floor of the Norman Chapel, screaming and kicking out sharply as water filled its lungs. Will had to suck in a long breath of the icy air, grabbing a fistful of his hair as it moved wetly down his throat. He squeezed his fist tightly for several seconds, then pushed on.

The gate screeched as it opened. Its vines caught at him, rough against his skin, and once inside, he shined his light over the gravestones erected a handful of feet away. It was not a sense of foreboding that fell over him then, but something somber, and hollow. Many of the dates on these graves eroded naturally as time moved on, as were most epitaphs in partially-laid pieces. There was a single commonality among the ones that remained. Their last name: *Lecter*.

Eventually, his meandering brought him to a high-mounted statue of an angel. Eyes emptied of their pupils, its wings were mantled over its shoulders. This angel did not watch over the gathered gravestones, but gazed away from them and toward the ground beneath it; shame and reverence competed across the finely-chiseled features of its face. To look was to know. This is what Will had come to realize. Should the angel have ever been made to look up, it would never have been able to pull its eyes away again, for there was no way to unknow that which was finally seen.

The back of Will's neck prickled, and he nearly jumped at the touch of a wet nose at his fingertips. Winston whined lowly behind him, nudging Will's hand harder. For a second, Will had thought... but no—this was real. He did not know where he was. But this was *real*.

A sweeping anxiety rose and fell within his chest. It felt at once like the very first time that Will rode to Palermo with Hannibal seated, and sketching, on the bench across from him. Though in the end, Hannibal did not accomplish much drawing over the course of the trip, for he—like Will—had been too occupied with thoughts that alternated between tasteless and divine. Once, Will believed he knew who Il Mostro was. The Monster of Florence, an artist of intellectual and classical taste who Will had never entirely thought of as tangible, but a mirror to which Will was unwillingly drawn, believing that through Il Mostro, he could reconcile the two halves of himself rather than continue to keep them apart. Merely the idea of another person who was just the same as Will had been enough to unsettle the cultivated structure of his mind where that darker half hid.

But all along, Will had been wrong. Il Mostro did not represent a union of halves, but the triumph of that darkness. To find out Hannibal had been leading him towards this, with Will unaware of such intimate influence as that...

It was a stark reminder that Will had changed Hannibal as much as Hannibal had changed him.

The Monster of Florence recreated beautiful paintings in his chosen victims, but without meaning aside from the internal—whimsical retribution and a personal understanding of the artist's work that only he himself would ever know or feel a connection to. For in truth, the murders would have continued until the monster returned home, and no one would ever have truly understood what Il Mostro intended to depict in them. Did not Il Mostro kill in twos because, perhaps unaware of it himself, he yearned for what those lesser creatures had?

When Will unknowingly offered that beauty back to Florence's monster—the chance of connection, to know and be known in return—the monster became *Hannibal.* No longer were they simple recreations, but outpourings of all that Hannibal wanted and wished to offer of himself. The Migliorini sisters were an acceptance of that which Hannibal and Will shared, while Natalina Mauriot was to be an illustration of how he imagined Will's becoming to unfold.

Feet sinking down beneath the snow, Will turned away from the stone angel, and in the gathering darkness where his lantern did not reach, he saw Paola Migliorini and the well upon which she sat appear amidst the sea of gravestones. She was darker in complexion than he remembered, a closer match to Natalina Mauriot, blurring their solemn, yearnful young faces. Blood cascaded down her naked breast from the gaping hole where her heart had once beat, while the heart in question convulsed in her outstretched hand, painted slick with black in the waning moonlight.

Will's heart thudded hard. He pressed his palm to his chest, willing it to slow. His shirt was soaked through with something sticky, wet and coppery, and he didn't dare remove his hand.

Half for you, half for me.

But what if Will did not wish to trade one half for another? Il Mostro was monstrous in his hunger—if Will allowed the monster its fill, what parts of himself would remain intact?

"What do you see, Will?" Paola croaked.

Will's eyes lidded and fell shut; there he saw the antlered, winged Zephyrus as the god had appeared to him before. Blissful, and indulgent, even as the black coloring its skin finished dripping away like the paint had fled the *Primavera*. Layer by layer, coat by coat. First paint, then charcoal, then idle sketch. The lines of creation reversed themselves, and in place of them, all that remained was Hannibal. It would *always* be Hannibal.

I see Zephyrus, Will had answered on the train to Palermo, when Hannibal asked.

But that wasn't who he saw, not any longer.

In his mind, he was brought back to the night of the gala, watching from afar as Hannibal turned Alessandra round in a mesmerizing dance. Hannibal feigned performative enjoyment as they circled in tune, until his eyes met Will's across the expansive room, and those eyes flashed, sly.

Swallowing, Will replied, "I see his face when I close my eyes."

When Winston barked at his side, the sound was muffled as though coming from a great distance away. Dizziness washed over Will, and as the vision of Paola Migliorini dissipated, a figure stepped forward through the place it had been seconds before.

Her symmetrical face appeared as a barn owl's might from the fading dark, heart-shaped and deceptively frail. She was the same age as Will, and wore riding breeches along with a shawl neatly pinned below her chin. A basket hung from the crook of her arm. From where Will stood, he spotted within it poppies and lilies the same muted shade of orange as depicted in the *Primavera*.

"Hello," she said, slow and unaffected, distinctly throaty for one so young.

Will, is that you? whispered several voices at once inside Will's head. And before he realized what was happening, he was falling.

The second time Will awoke, it was morning. He was back in the stall in the barn, streaks of sunlight dipping in the shallow folds of the sheets and blankets. Will lay on his back, and though he was covered in less layers than last night, a long line of heat budged up against his side: Winston, wuffling softly as he dozed.

Paper crackled and crunched near the door, and Will's gaze flicked upward to meet that of the girl that found him lost among the gravestones. *So that* was *real*, he thought.

"You look better," she observed as she sat on her knees by the head of the mattress. She had in her lap a bowl wrapped in brown paper. "I made you soup."

Without preamble, the girl ladled a spoonful and brought it to Will's mouth while he moved to sit up.

"Wait," he said, not anticipating the way his voice scratched in his throat. He cleared it, awkward, and watched as both the girl and Winston turned their heads to stare at him in unison. "I... who are you?" The soup smelled delicious, but an aftertaste lingered in its wake; repugnant, and sour, and in his mind it turned to yellow froth startlingly similar to Cordell's specially-made dish.

His stomach twisted uncomfortably.

"Chiyoh," she answered simply. She had that flatness about her tone that she'd had earlier, but this was soon offset when her expression shifted beneath a minute scrunching of her nose. "Will you eat now?"

When she attempted to feed him again, Will shook his head. “I can feed myself,” he argued, stubborn. But Will never liked to be dependent on others—it made him vulnerable, and adults more likely to treat him like an ignorant, incapable child. To Will, who struggled to retain as much semblance of who he was when he still had his dad, before, his ability to choose for himself was the most important thing in the world.

“I was trained by Lady Murasaki to do this,” Chiyoh told him slowly. She was not upset in the normal sense, only meeting his stubbornness in equal measure. He saw a glimpse of her then, glinting like dew-laden porcelain petals behind the dark set of her eyes and tied hair. Honor was as important to her as identity was to Will. She’d given her word to someone, and her word could not be taken back.

He relented, sipping at the soup she brought to his mouth. It was hot, but gladly so, chasing the last dregs of roughness from his aching throat as he swallowed. Chiyoh’s movements were diligent as she stirred the soup, practiced as she lifted it up again, and every time, her eyes caught on him like thorns. Was it the intense pall over her attentive gaze which made him feel this way? Chiyoh could not decide whether Will was a sickly, grounded bird in need of care, or something *other* that she should do well to be wary of.

What exactly did this odd girl know about Will?

“Where am I?” Will asked after the silence between them grew too oppressive to bear. Winston moved his head to rest upon Will’s knee, beneath the blanket, and sighed.

“Aukštaitija,” Chiyoh replied, ladling more soup. “Lithuania.”

“And how,” said Will, tilting his cadence upward with considerable coolness, “did I arrive in Lithuania, Chiyoh?”

Though polite, a subtle downward quirk flitted about the corners of her small mouth. Chiyoh watched Will gravely, as if he had spoken something rather foolish, out of turn, and it was not her place to comment as such. True enough, for she did not deign to answer.

“Thank you, Will. I am returning to the house now.” She rose to her feet, bowl and ladle carried carefully in the center of her chest. He caught another glint in her eyes then, quick and fleeting as a cat’s. “You may follow, but please, do not try to leave.”

Will could not fault her suspicion of him, just as he could not fault the responding feeling in himself. Chiyoh left soon after, allowing him the time to mull over the answer she’d given him. There was no doubt in his mind that Hannibal had brought him here, and he wondered what Chiyoh knew. She was far more intelligent than one would expect by looking at her— a level of cunningness, he supposed, that Hannibal saw in Will, too. All those gravestones in the woods had belonged to the Lecter family, and at Chiyoh’s mention of Lady Murasaki—Hannibal’s aunt, whom he’d spoken of several days before—Will wondered at how she fit into Hannibal’s life.

He would just have to follow her, and find out.

Winston was close on his heels as he stepped out into the snowdrifts that marked the ground beyond the barn doors. A coat was left folded at Will's bedside, one that was a little long for him, but suitably insulated for the cold. It was made of firm grey wool and smelt overpoweringly of smoke, and beneath that, a scent akin to bramble bushes and old earth. He was surprised at how much this reminded him of Hannibal, but even so, he did not want to know when last the coat had been washed. There was a scarf, as well, and as he again began his trek to the manor visible through the trees, he wrapped it securely around his neck.

By now, Chiyoh's linear treads could be seen in the snow. She had a short gait, thus Will did not find himself lost as he made his way to the house. In the sallow, overcast light of morning, the cloud cover lent the ambient air an almost greenish hue intermixed with the grey. The house had become off-white in color with age, after decades if not centuries of wear, and the brick foundation that ran halfway up the walls and the rounded, turret-like sections were tarnished with moss and voracious ivy.

Instead of heading for the entrance, Will circled around the back. The grounds opened up into a series of sheds and fenced-in runs for animals, all seemingly abandoned. Though the absolute last person Will expected to see, stood some yards away and splitting logs with an axe, was *Hannibal*.

Hannibal did not notice Will's presence for several minutes, and in that time, Will noted how tattered and worn Hannibal's clothes were. It was unthinkable, alien, to see Hannibal in anything less than finery; hunched, and a rigidness to his body that suggested exhaustion. The dark fabric of his coat was dirtied, his ashen hair remarkable in its dishevelment, and he hid his face behind his turned-up collar.

Chop. Another log on the chopping block broke in two, and Hannibal reached for the next.

Without any effort on Will's part, their eyes met across the snow and uneven fencing. Something ugly caught in Will's throat there, tasting sickeningly of seeping rot. Though far off, Hannibal's face was notably different than the last Will had seen it. Shadows rested in the hollows beneath Hannibal's eyes, adding a regrettable dullness to the particular shade of his irises, and an inexplicable hesitance and sterility had become etched deeply into his countenance in ill-fitting, ungainly scores. Together, the two proved to be little more than empty of emotion.

"Hannibal," Will murmured.

Hannibal said nothing. His eyes, heavy with disquiet, only stared.

"I have seen him like this once before," spoke a low voice behind Will. He found that he no longer had the energy to be surprised, when he turned. It was Chiyoh. She was shorter than him by at least five inches, but did not let this deter the gravity with which her eyes fixated on him. Also, she was carrying another basket, this time with eggs. Will felt light in the head.

"Hannibal?"

She nodded, eyes flicking over Will's shoulder. When Will followed suit, his heart skipped at the sight of the chopping block, impaled through with the axe. Hannibal had disappeared

without a sound, nor trace. But from the movement of Chiyoh's gaze, he could deduce where Hannibal had gone—hidden from sight in the woods.

"Hannibal," said Chiyoh.

"How do you know Hannibal?"

She deliberated this question for a moment, lips faintly pursed. "I was schooled under Lady Murasaki. As her handmaiden, she allowed me to accompany her to France when she married Robert Lecter, Hannibal's uncle." As she exhaled, her breath fogged the air. "Hannibal asked me to offer you what I could. I don't have much, but I can help you understand."

"...understand?" Will repeated, uncertain.

"Come," she said, and offered him a mitten-clad hand. Chiyoh's smile was kind, but not the sort that ate at Will as most tended to do. Rather, he was beginning to realize he liked her very much. "There are always more chickens, and I could use the help."

Chiyoh was quiet, but that suited Will just fine. He was beginning to see a similarity which they shared: an outward-facing mask, which for Chiyoh, was one of patience and forgiveness. She was gentle with the chickens, moving through the nest boxes with efficiency but curiously wary of Will's wandering eyes. She hid her crring coos for them by turning her back to him.

The eggs felt strange inside Will's hands. Lighter than he'd always guessed, and smoother, they were a speckled, fawnish brown. While Will worked, the hens picked at seeds Chiyoh threw across the dirt. When she and Will first entered inside the shed, she began with a story: Hannibal's time in the war, before and then after. Almost like a secret, she told him of Mischa and all that had happened to her, the knowledge a difficult weight to carry.

"You know about him, don't you?" Will said as he knelt to gather the eggs from the bottom shelf. The downy feathers left behind in the hay tickled at his skin. On the other side of the narrow coop, Chiyoh stilled.

"There are things I know," she offered, and ran her hand down the back of one of the hens that had returned to its box, "and there are things I choose not to know."

"Does it hurt you, knowing what you know?"

Will could have counted the seconds she took to answer. "Yes," she said, toneless, and leant down to coo at the hen. Her dark hair was finally beginning to loosen itself from her bun, strands of it sticking to her cheeks. She could have hid behind it if she let it down, but she didn't.

"What do you know?" he asked.

"He does what was done to her," she said simply, her body pressing close to Will's as she slid out behind him. "His Mischa."

Will wondered why Hannibal would not kill Chiyoh for knowing. Was it because she was family, or because she was as Hannibal's sister would have been—no more than a little girl? But that would be remiss of him, to ignore the truth of Hannibal's monstrous nature. To monsters, no one should have mattered, but Hannibal was not emotionless. In fact, he felt emotion more deeply than any other person Will had come to know. Hannibal lost control at times, as much as he fought to maintain that restraint. But even so, monsters could love, could they not?

Even monsters could see a beautiful thing and know with certainty that they loved it.

Hannibal had said this to Will beneath the arched ceiling of the Norman Chapel. Will thought it fitting of Il Mostro, then. Only someone who loved the beauty of Botticelli's artwork and all that Botticelli's decorous, yearning subjects portrayed could elevate that artwork to something worth making real.

Will almost thought to ask Chiyoh, *why Botticelli?* But Will did not need to. In the act of stealing Chloris from the world, Zephyrus offered her love and godhood; immortality, together. Hannibal loved the *Primavera* for the splendor hidden beneath the barbaric, the grotesque wedded to the spring. Zephyrus vied for Chloris' devotion, and in return gave her domain of all that flowered and bloomed. You did not need a reason, after all, when speaking of beautiful things.

"But Hannibal wasn't always like this," Will stated, even as he pondered it. Chiyoh went outside and tossed more seeds for the chickens to eat. There were not many chickens left, she had said. What few survived the winter were scraggly, while others were missing great clumps of their wings. Winston lay down near the steps that led up into the shed, ears swiveling forward at the pop of the shells as they hit the rocks.

Will's dad used to take him fishing when they lived in Michigan. Then his dad left the tackle box out, and stupidly, Will thought to test the biggest fishhooks through the supple flesh of his fingertips, for no other reason than curiosity, and the idle idea of drawing blood. His dad hadn't been furious; he hadn't comforted Will during their subsequent trip to the emergency room, either, only patted Will's back and said that it'd be *okay.*

There are certain drives you are born with that cannot be inherited or learned over time. Inside, Will knew this about himself. And he already knew that he was wrong.

Chiyoh did as well, for she glanced up from the chickens that pecked around her feet, and said nothing. Will had answered his question himself.

"He has not changed, not really," she amended. "Before the war Hannibal was a child, after… Hannibal is still very much the child he was. He would never harm you or me, just as he would never choose to harm Mischa."

Trauma was an ugly thing, marked by poisonous grief and unseen scars. It was not an infection that went away.

"There are places on these grounds where Hannibal cannot go. Memories," Chiyoh said, "he chooses not to know. He cannot change those aspects of himself. You cannot change those

aspects of yourself."

"You think we are the same?"

"I think Hannibal wants you to be the same, more than he has ever wanted anything else since. Where your minds meet and share those rooms inside your mind, does it feel like conversion, or does it feel like change?"

Will laughed, then. It was louder than he meant it to be, and he had to stop himself and thank her.

In response, a smile played at the corners of her lips even as she watched the chickens.

He thought... he thought that he understood, now. The pieces of Il Mostro that had slotted together like a puzzle blew away then drifted back to him again. He was not afraid of the face they painted; Hannibal's face, the one he *saw,* without any barriers to speak of.

It was at that moment that Will spotted Hannibal in the distance, just beyond the boundary of the woods. He must have been watching them for a while now, as they spoke, too far to hear just what was being said, and yet Hannibal's mouth pulled into an unhappy, severe frown.

Beside Chiyoh, Winston's ears ticked up. He raised his head to yip sharply, scaring the nearest of the chickens away as he noticed Hannibal, too, and wagged his tail.

"He is too fearful of you to approach," Chiyoh told Will, assured of her words as she spoke them. She was eyeing the sky now; the wash of grey clouds that blended seamlessly overhead, and the tree branches that reached for them with grasping, gnarled hands.

"Is he... angry?" Will whispered, unable to look away.

"His *nakama* saves his smile for another." Chiyoh brushed by Will again, and where their shoulders touched, Will was overwhelmed by so small a comfort. "Do not worry. It will pass."

Hannibal's jealousy was palpable no matter the distance between them. For the remainder of the day, it was as though the attention of those maroon eyes were an itch beneath his skin, burning where they rested. Hannibal was given to stalking the woods, always on the peripheral, and that was perfectly fine with Will. He did not know if he was ready to speak with Hannibal again. He would, in time. But there was still yet more he had to accept first.

Chiyoh was a pillar of calm in the center of the storm. She had come to Castle Lecter of her own accord, to tend to the animals after the last groundskeeper departed and Lady Murasaki, worried over the curt letter that Hannibal sent home a week prior, wished for Chiyoh to be present here should Hannibal return.

The inner rooms of the house were no better off than the barn where Will slept. No one had lived here since the war, and after looters picked it over, it fell to disrepair just as the rest of the grounds. Several rooms were useable, if sparsely furnished. Hannibal had spent much of the early morning chopping wood for the fireplace, and there was space on the floor to pile

blankets before it to sit and keep warm. This was what Chiyoh had taken to doing, though she could not say the same for Hannibal. Neither she nor Will knew where Hannibal had made his own bed in the meantime, if he'd slept through the night at all.

They built a fire and had eggs for lunch, and later dinner. Sometime during the evening, Will felt less like he was being watched. In fact, after hours went by with no sight of Hannibal, Will worried that he had gone. It grew dark again, and colder, and Chiyoh firmly believed that Hannibal was out there in the woods somewhere.

By mid-morning two days later, Hannibal was still missing. Chiyoh lead Will out to the cemetery, Winston plodding alongside them, and brought Will to Mischa Lecter's grave. She laid out fresh flowers beneath the engraving; white tulips and spindly gladioli today, inexplicable, for Will did not know where she was finding them. However, the peace he felt in that moment did not last for long.

Back toward the house where they had come, birds scattered, and a gunshot rung out through the trees.

Chapter 16

When the crows shrieked and flew up from the cover of trees, they dispersed, quick as smoke, into the grey sky. At Will's hip, Winston flicked his ears forward, a growl rumbling in his throat before it cut off into a low whine. Uncertain of what to do with himself, Will set a hand against Winston's scruff, and hoped that alone would keep him from taking off into the woods. Will was not afraid; rather, the last few days of tending to the grounds with Chiyoh had lent Will a veil of exhaustion which numbed him down to the barest aspects of himself.

A distant, curious voice in his head pondered if Hannibal would ever use a gun. Surely not, for a killer as physical as Il Mostro would never choose any avenue lacking the intimacy a knife could so easily bring. Though Will worried for Hannibal's state of mind, how it might splinter beneath the weight of their shared frustration, he knew he did not need to worry for Hannibal's safety. Subdued by this knowledge, and unhurried, he glanced to Chiyoh to study her own reaction.

Though quiet as she stared out into the trees, a subtle furrow had formed between her brows. "Do you think that Hannibal…," she said, her breath fogging beneath the hood of her shawl. She trailed off as she spoke, a question she did not really wish to be answered, for then she began moving at a steady clip past the graves. Winston bounded after the billowing, deep red fabric that moved and jumped at her back. Will's curiosity, more than anything, was what prompted him to follow.

The house soon came into sight again through the thicket and dark cuts of branches. Chiyoh was silent on her feet in the snow, and circled around to where the chickens were locked up in the shed. Will had grown accustomed to using a door at the front-facing side of the house, for it lead into the sitting area where he and Chiyoh spent most of their time before the fireplace. The outside runs had first been built to accompany the back kitchens, rooms which, according to Chiyoh, were too dangerous to enter for fear of the roof falling in above them. When the looters left in haste, they dropped many of the porcelain and glass dishes found within the cupboards, strewing shattered splinters across the tile floors. Will did not need to enter to see where snow had blown in from outside, through holes in the once beautiful, tall windows and the unhinged back door.

While Chiyoh remained light on her feet, Will felt as though glass creaked beneath his every step. She diverted one way around the wide, long center counter and he took the other. Winston, for his part, remained behind—pawing at the snow along the doorway and whining, low. Nothing Will said would get him to come inside.

There were obvious shadows in the stripped, water-stained wallpaper where appliances and expensive fixtures once sat, sinks filled with trash and gnarled scrap metal, and a pantry piled with old rags where some wild animal or another had at one point made a temporary home. At first, Will thought Chiyoh over-cautious for entering the house this way, but then he noticed the tracks in the snow that led deeper inside. Someone had been here recently. They had circled around the same way that Will had and went further into the house; bootprints narrow and fleet.

He shared a look with Chiyoh across the counter. Strands of her hair had come undone from her bun, sticking to her pale cheeks. Her lips parted as she exhaled and placed a single finger against them, hushing Will even as he remained silent.

In the outer hallway, Chiyoh crept ahead toward the bend. At the end of the next turn, the hall opened into the front sitting room. Puddles of water that had once been snow, and melted, led that way. Chiyoh went first, and in that time, Will counted his breaths. He went on the fifth. When he caught up to her, he did not need to be told where to look to see the man who stood facing away from them in front of the sitting room windows. This man was foreign, out of place: clothing ratty and ill-fitting, his skin was covered in a noticeable film of grit, his hair matted with dirt. From behind, the broad breadth of the man's shoulders flexed as he adjusted his grip on his shotgun. And as he pushed around Chiyoh's collection of pans and canned fruits with the end of the barrel, the veins on his hands stood out in stark relief.

The cans clattered as he sifted through them. Chiyoh had stopped breathing beside Will, and she took a step back now, hiding herself in the shadow of the hall.

Will, unthinking, took another step forward.

He did not know what he would have done had he gotten any closer to the man. Immediately after he had moved into the sitting room, Winston bumped up against the back of Will's legs and, seeing the man, growled like Will had never heard him before. Ragged, it raised goosebumps along Will's arms and neck.

At the sound, the man pivoted, fast, and lifted his gun. "Move, and I'll shoot," he hissed, vowels exaggerated, thick with accent.

More obvious than anything else was the minute hesitation of the gun barrel, the twitch of the man's fingers at the trigger as he took in the sight of Will—not a threat, nor a possibility thereof, but an unarmed and unfrightened young boy.

Still, the man did not drop his gun. His eyes tightened into beady slits, and he asked, "*Where is he*?" Spit flew from his wetted bottom lip, then again as the man asked a second time in a language Will didn't understand.

Winston barked several times in succession, teeth bared. Will could not begin to answer the man's question, and so he chose not to, allowing the necessary mask to click into place—cool, unbothered, and above all, innocent.

"You shouldn't be in here," Will observed, a steady, rising tide to his tone that was near-sonorous in the high-ceiling room. As Winston's growl tapered off, the front door unlatched and slid open. Silent on its treads, the man did not notice it opening over his shoulder—not even when Hannibal stepped inside.

"Tell me," the man grunted, "Where is he?"

It was you, thought Will. *You were shooting at Hannibal, weren't you?*

It was unfortunate, then, that the man had missed.

He's right behind you.

In a flash, Hannibal had grabbed the man in a chokehold that sent the gun clattering to the floor. Winston did not stop barking until the man was restrained, knees on the floor and arms bent behind his back. The man spat out venomous, unrecognizable curses in that same language, struggling uselessly beneath Hannibal's skilled hands. Will did not know what was worse, the emptiness with which Hannibal had watched Will while Monsieur Lefebvre bled out across Will's bedroom floor, or the cruelty that marked Hannibal's countenance now, sharpening the unimpressed line of his mouth. *This is what you think of me*, said the glint of those eyes and brief flicker of crooked teeth. Hannibal kicked the shotgun away, and with a startling efficiency of movement, once more grabbed ahold of the man's neck in preparation to twist. *I'm a monster, just as you say.*

The words lodged in Will's throat in his desperation to speak them. *You don't need to do this.*

And Hannibal would have, in the end, had it not been for Chiyoh. As the man squirmed and yelled, Chiyoh ran from the cover of the hall. Her face had become flushed, her hair fallen further in disarray—a sure a sign as any that she was no longer aware of anything that was not Hannibal.

"Wait! Hannibal!" she pleaded, heavy breath stirring the hair that stuck to her rosy mouth. In the resounding quiet, Hannibal slowly cocked his head at her. It was infuriating, for all that Will knew Hannibal to be merely *playing* with them both. This was not like with Monsieur Lefebvre. As much as Will did not wish to accept it, Hannibal had only acted then to protect Will—a loss of control that was as difficult for Hannibal to stop as it was for Will to come to terms with. *This* though, this was conscious.

"Killing him will not bring her back," said Chiyoh, hardly more than a whisper, but heady with gravitas all the same. Like the peeling *Primavera* in Will's mind, and later his vision of Zephyrus whose outer skin shed to reveal a second underneath—the cruel, mocking visage fled from the furthest corners of Hannibal's face, and in place of it, something more human emerged, precise in its sorrow. Not since the gala had Will seen such a slippage of Hannibal's mask. Blown open by Chiyoh's words, the fragile depth of the emotion that lived there was not unlike that which the forest around the abandoned Lecter home exuded, oozing the painful discharge of time that could never be rewound.

During the war, it was men no better than monsters who killed Hannibal's sister. Their leader —*Vladis Grutas*, Chiyoh had murmured late one cold night—was monstrous enough to threaten children, but even moreso to then eat them. Will had puzzled over the man's unclean clothes and inhuman, beady gaze, and he realized that he should have known. He had thought the man a looter, when in reality, the war symbols on his coat were a telling sign as any. This was the man who ate Mischa.

"Please," Chiyoh again asked, unwavering as she straightened her spine, "do not kill him."

For a long moment, Hannibal did not react. Then he shifted his hold on the man, Grutas, and held his hand out to Chiyoh. She deliberated her own response for seconds longer, before stepping closer to set her hand in his. Sedate, Hannibal then placed hers on the side of the man's neck; lifting up and down, rapid, with the unsteady pull of the man's breathing.

“No, Hannibal,” she said, and shook her head. Though Will could not see her face, he could imagine the steely resolve which flashed in her black eyes. “I refuse to do this. I am not like you.”

It was a pointed statement. To Will, it was a curiosity. The indecision that entered into Hannibal’s expression went hand-in-hand with his desire to see what Chiyoh would do. Even bonded by shared history, could Hannibal not resist the temptation to toy?

Hannibal said nothing, only tilted his head, lashes dusting his cheeks as he studied her.

“Then I—I will keep him here.” Chiyoh retrieved her hand, took a handful of steps back. “You led him here for a reason. He has been searching for you, as you have him. There is a place where I can keep him, where he will never be free again.” Then determined, “I will cage him.”

Some beasts shouldn’t be caged, thought Will. He saw something like it behind Chiyoh’s own mask, the same that she and Will shared. For beasts recognize in each other the potential to be free. Chiyoh came with Lady Murasaki to Europe in order to achieve freedom, just as she had come to Lithuania to find Hannibal of her own free will. Caging Grutas would cage her, too.

“Chiyoh…,” Will began, and moved to rest his hand against her back, through her shawl and coat. “You don’t want that.”

He met Hannibal’s gaze again over Chiyoh’s shoulder, and the look they shared was long and filled with unexplainable things. He thought it might have been understanding. But maybe it was hope.

In the end, Will guided Chiyoh outside and into the chicken coop, where she could run her fingers through the feathers of the closest of the hens, and soak in the silence of the cold day. Will did not ask what Hannibal would do to the man when they left. More than anyone else possibly could, he only knew that Hannibal needed to do this.

In the time since Will had woken in Lithuania, he remained close to the house and to Chiyoh. These woods were cramped with trees, which loomed and merged together. It would be so easy to get lost, he had thought, and in his mind, he imagined walking these woods forever—always cold, and always filled with that slow, aching sense of loneliness that pervaded the grounds here, the memories buried deep beneath the unturned soil and snow. For this reason, when the time came for the evening to give way to the fullness of night, and Will abandoned Chiyoh and Winston asleep by their meager fire to venture out into the dark, he was surprised to find the barn in a different state than he’d left it. The doors lay ajar.

Unlike the house, the barn was draftier, chillier. Dust clogged the corners and crevices, a tangible weight upon his skin which kicked up with the drag of his boots. More notable, however, was the ambient isolation and solitude.

Will retraced the path to the stall where he had woken. He paused at the opening, observing the state of the mattress; the neatness of the sheets and blankets, diligently made. It had not occurred to Will to question where the makeshift bed had come from, or whether it had always been meant for Will. This, at least, explained where Hannibal was disappearing to. Too proud to risk being near Will, even when the Lecter manor provided insulation and a source of heat? That sounded like the Hannibal he knew.

The hour was late, but not dreadfully so. Despite this, Will turned the blankets down and settled into the clean sheets. They smelt mildly of mint and gardenia, he found. It was calming, safe. After a while, he grew comfortably sleepy and flipped over on his side to face the wall. And for the first night in many nights, he did not have to lie awake for hours until his mind drifted soundly away.

Will dreamt of a bed floating in darkness. His dad stood at its foot, liver held out to Will in trembling, callused hands, an offering as provocative as Paola Migliorini's heart. Then an incision formed along the liver's length, the clean work of a scalpel that wasn't there, and spilt in its wake an outpouring of congealed bile. The flow stuttered and sprang to life again, pushing out dead and rotted leaves which glistened with slick from the widening wound. They dropped, pulpy and thick, into the darkness below.

He awoke on a shuddering, muted sob that shriveled on his tongue. Panting, and confused, Will did not immediately become aware of the heat pressed along his back. Where it fit up against him, shaped to match the curvature of Will's spine, the mattress dipped with their combined weight. Even so, where the heat seeped pleasantly into Will's skin, there was a distinct strip of space that separated him from the body behind him. Close, but never quite touching.

A breath tickled at the nape of Will's neck, and somehow, he knew that it was Hannibal. Briefly, he wondered drowsily over the one point of contact between them: the bend of Hannibal's elbow around Will's chest, just above the hip, with fingers curved loosely into the sheets an inch from Will's stomach.

Short of moving, Will could not ascertain if Hannibal was awake. But he got his answer soon enough, for Hannibal's arm fell away, and the heat receded along with it. Chin turned up in the dark, Will could hardly see the other's outline. His eyes would take too long to adjust and so he settled again, deciding quickly on how to stop Hannibal from standing up and leaving entirely—because from the sound of it, that was exactly what was happening.

When he felt Hannibal start to pull away, this time Will allowed a mien of tearfulness to overtake his voice. Relying on a recollection of Winston, doleful as he mouthed at Will's empty, treatless hands, Will managed a hushed whine. "Hurts."

Though Hannibal likely saw easily through Will's manipulation, Hannibal grew still upon the mattress, animal-like, and sidled close once more. Rather than working to Will's benefit, however, he was soon grumpy to find Hannibal raising his arm to study it in the faint moonlight. Monsieur Lefebvre's fingernails had left gaping, discolored bruises across Will's upper arm in the days after Hannibal killed him. Though more time had passed since, they were only now beginning to fade, and were still livid and ugly as blisters on his skin.

Hannibal studied them for a period too long. Then, perhaps losing himself for but a moment, he leant forward as if to sweep the tip of his nose along the underside of Will's arm to the wrist. Hannibal caught himself before that happened, but then Will caught Hannibal, just the same. Will touched his fingertips to the side of Hannibal's head, and pushed, until Hannibal voluntarily gave up that power and allowed himself to be similarly manipulated as before.

Hannibal's position mirrored that which he'd held over Will in his bedroom, minutes after Monsieur Lefebvre was cast violently to the floor. Leant over Will as he was now, Hannibal did what he hadn't dared to then: he nuzzled his nose into the side of Will's sleep-warmed cheek, smile not seen but rather felt as it tugged softly at his skin.

When Hannibal pulled away, he did not go far. Scant inches apart, Will's eyes finally adjusted to the darkness. He caught a hint of delight, raw as a child's, cradled in that smile.

The second time Hannibal leant in close, he hesitated, and did not bridge that gap. It was Will who nudged him back, nuzzling along the sharp slope of Hannibal's cheekbone, and up, where the edge of his eye creased with unraveling emotion. They laid there for overlong, but too-short moments, warm against the outside cold, until Will's stomach twisted, and that image of his dad flashed through his skull.

After another shuddering spasm had worked its way through Will, he offered, "Bad dream."

So long had Hannibal gone without speaking, that when it happened, now, his voice grated slightly from disuse. Low, he whispered, "What did you see, Will?"

"My dad."

"How did he die?"

"Liver cancer," Will murmured.

Hannibal was quiet for a time, then like it was the simplest thing in the world, he said, "You want someone who will protect you."

Will could protect himself. But that wasn't true, not really. Certainly not for many years to come. Will shook his head, the curls of his hair falling soft in the hollow of Hannibal's throat. The smell of sweat was oppressive, so close, but one born for the sake of warmth and survival. Will wrinkled his nose against it.

You have me, the companionable press of Hannibal's body against his seemed to say. Two similar halves, like to like, now whole. *You, and no one else*.

At length, Will replied, "I want someone who will understand."

Chapter 17

Every experience of loss is singular, *different* , be it a fault of personality, of upbringing, or the measure of one's self-inflicted vulnerability, but most assuredly, it is different when experienced young. For Will, the most knowable act of loss was not the pain it imparted in its wake, but a persistent absence of emotion that manifested, at first numbly, into an aching chest and searching hands. Those were the building blocks of phantom limbs: forgone physicality and the exposed strings of a wounded heart, roughened breath made to bruise every slackened strand.

The night Will learned of his dad's passing, he was met with a momentary peculiarity of thought and body. A stutter, a *catch*, and a yawning expanse of cracks. The human mind has such a great capacity to bend and stretch, but not his. No, *Will Graham* 's mind, like any typical mirror, had only the means to grow flush with fissures and burgeoning gaps. He remembered that long-ago night in fragments, associations his mind cleaved to with fearful abandon, and which oozed from even the most carefully laid hallways in his mind. His dad's lilting voice rising up from the tangling mass: *someday you might not even remember what it was you forgot.*

What Will remembered was little more than this: the scratch of his pencil in the margins of his homework as he worked quietly at the cramped kitchen table, a rhythmic *pop* filling the air as water boiled in a pot on the stove, and his view of the room's only window across from him; left open, it was a perfect square section of black that looked out into the woods behind the house. He thought perhaps that a radio had been playing from the room next door, but that part of his memory was less precise. In any case, when the corded phone by the fridge began to ring, the radio was soon silenced, and his dad's boatyard buddy—the same who had offered to watch over Will while his dad remained at the hospital—slipped into the kitchen to answer it with a tired, depleted *yes?*

It would have been easy to block out the exchange which his temporary caretaker mumbled over the phone. It would have been easier still to have run. For a brief moment, Will's eyes fastened to that window, and it was almost as if he were staring into a painting, secure in its frame. *He's just a kid*, the man said, voice brittle as parchment. *What do I even tell him?*

After, Will did not run. He stood from the table, and walked outside. At the time, he'd been all of nine years old, a child not yet over his simple fear of the dark. Dissociating at his seams, it was as if he'd stepped through the kitchen window, careful so as to not hit his heel against the frame, and wandered out into the night, all quiet, all lost, save for the scream of cicadas he could not see. Will saw only trees the same black as the sky overhead, the same sky which dripped down into their branches and left them ugly and malformed as it went. And he remembered, like a secret, how the last of the summer fireflies had winked out as his vision grew blurry with unshed tears.

These details called him back, time and again, to the place where his control first began to slip, insinuating themselves into the parts of his mind that could never be allowed to come back. Was it here that he split himself in two? Or was it here that one part of him died—and

the other, broken, let itself be almost wholly forgotten. Preservation was the instinct of animals; for a human child such as Will, only one thing had room to give. All the years since, Will had grown used to pretending, to fabricating the boy that he was not. And all along, he'd been hiding far deeper from even himself.

The next time that sleep came for Will, he did not dream of the woods that populated his subconscious as thickly as they had his dad's property in New Orleans. For the first time, instead, the woods he saw were those of Lithuania and the snow-laden hills that surrounded the ancestral Lecter home. Leaner, and dappled in shifting shades of grey, the trees were softened by the diffuse light of dusk. The dead leaves still clinging to the highest boughs glimmered like forbidden fruit and brought about a strange craving in his gut. When he had the presence of mind to glance around himself, he saw neither the barn nor the manor in the distance; in fact, he hardly recognized where he was at all.

The light dimmed further, and fearing he would soon be lost in the oncoming dark, he turned to head off in the other direction. However, he was frozen, stock-still, at the sight of a little girl stood several paces away. She wore Chiyoh's shawl, a brilliant cut of red against the white of the snow, though her hair was blonde and struck-through with ash.

The throb in his gut hollowed out into something unpleasant: a warning. Will met her eyes, and started, at the hungry maroon he saw there.

She stalked toward Will without a word, the subtle breeze which knit through the trees pushing through her hair and the furred collar around her neck. The tilt to her mouth was wondering, drawn forth like a magnet, much how Anthony Dimmond had once marveled at Will between the bookshelves of a library in Florence. She stopped a hair away from touching her nose to Will's, and yet she did not kiss him as Anthony Dimmond had. Rather, Will blinked, and the next moment she was covered head to neck in sloppy, runny viscera and blood. It offset the color of her eyes, the deepening black of her pupils as they grew large and fat until very little red remained.

No sooner had she leant closer was Will flinching back, and she paused there, consideration bobbing briefly to the surface of her irises. A chunk of flesh dripped from her chin and spattered the snow between their feet, and, distracted, Will did not move away before her mouth ghosted over his throat, scenting him in her languid perusal of his jugular. He took a halting step back, but in truth, they were tied now; she dipped forward along with him and growled beneath her breath. Synapses fired and snapped in the very back of Will's mind, and he tasted rancid, repugnant meat behind his teeth. It was a sourness he recognized, distantly, as Cordell Doemling.

The girl seemed pleased when Will stopped in his tracks, for her growling ceased, and she nuzzled as Hannibal had up the crease alongside Will's nose. Then she shifted, her own throat vibrating so sweet, and bit his cheek.

Will awoke slowly, his breathing deep, unhindered even by the imagined numbness where teeth had punctured skin. Unlike so many dreams before, he was not left shivering with cold in the aftershocks. Instead he found himself to be encased in warmth, a layer of sweat already growing in the pits of his knees and elbows beneath layers of blankets. For Will was no longer curled up on a barn floor as he'd been when he fell asleep beside Hannibal the night

before. The disorientation of waking was quick to leave his limbs and head, and he remembered, blearily, Hannibal rousing him that morning only to bundle him into a nondescript car, and shortly after, onto a train headed back to Italy, and to Florence.

In his exhaustion, Will must have slept most of the day away, for the darkness that pervaded the stale air of their train cabin was not quite absolute, but changeable, and cool. Evening fled before his eyes, only to be supplanted with the deepening weight of night. Beneath it, all that remained of Hannibal's outline was broken apart by shadow. They slept on opposite benches. Will lay on his side, wrapped in blankets much as he had been the first time they rode together to Palermo, while Hannibal maintained a seated position nearest the door. In the glow of the streetlights that slid by outside, Will caught glimpses of Hannibal's closed eyes and the downward slope of his face. The pronounced ridges of Hannibal's nose and cheeks were made sharper for the angle, exaggerating the juts of bone under which those shadows stubbornly clung, and forming natural depths as deceptive as contoured gorges.

Still, there was a overlying smoothness to Hannibal's features, to his loose brow and the idle shift of his eyes beneath lowered lids in sleep. *Vulenerable* was not the proper word for it, nor did Will think it made Hannibal appear more human. Though Will had never before seen Hannibal given to sleep, he imagined this was as calculated an act as any when it came to the man widely known as *Il Mostro di Firenze*.

The child from Will's dream who had gazed at him with imploring hunger drifted to the forefront of his thoughts again, much like a bucket of cold water that tipped and trickled down the notches of his spine at a patient pace. When Hannibal had wound himself around Will during the night, the space they made between themselves had been at once unbreachable and unreal. Like bone and sinew made of the same simple cells, broken down and reformed anew, something inside Will had given way, and he knew he could no longer remain at war with the emotions inside himself. He knew now what Hannibal was to him, but far less certain was what he was to Hannibal.

He thought he'd felt it, once. In Hannibal's dining room, feeling only warmth in the crooked-toothed smile which Hannibal sent him across the table and overtop the outspread meat of Paola's heart. A part of Will had known the truth of what he was eating even then, and still he had greedily gravitated toward Hannibal's gentled tone and words. The more Will dreamed, the more he felt he understood the loneliness which he and Hannibal shared. He'd dreamt of his dad first, and now *this* —a little girl, uncannily familiar and painted in blood. It was a truth he was afraid to divulge even to himself.

Will feared the abandonment he'd experienced times before. But he feared the possibility that, for Hannibal, he was a *replacement* even more.

The quiet in the cabin was not an easy one to break. In truth, he had not spoken to Hannibal since their exchange during the night. For that reason, Will knew he needed to be careful with the delicate, fragile thing newly nursed between them. It had felt like a promise; but to Will, it was an omen of what was to come. And now, he worried he might lose this, and lose Hannibal, as well.

The Hannibal he knew died that night in the catacombs beneath the Norman Chapel. With trembling trepidation, Will accepted the part of himself that clung to Il Mostro—to the *real*

Hannibal—with all that he had. He'd seen its reflection in Hannibal's eyes beneath the shrouded darkness of the barn, the one thing Will had repeatedly forced from his mind since Hannibal first told him of an aunt and uncle in Paris. It was the idea that separation would never truly be an option for them.

Forgetting the hour for but a moment, Will dropped his chin to his chest, steadying his breath as he croaked, "Do you think of me like you did her?"

The train clacked noisily along its tracks, and Will almost thought that he'd been wrong. Was Hannibal asleep? But no, Hannibal was staring at him now; faint in the gloom, but no less obvious for the fox-like shine of Hannibal's eyes in the scattered light that leaked through the blinds.

Will brought his knees toward his abdomen, settled his chin atop them, and exhaled tiredly through his mouth. He held Hannibal's gaze, and feeling bolder, he murmured, "Am I as your sister once was to you?"

You want someone who will protect you, Hannibal had said. The words had burned then, worming into Will's heart and making him yearn for something he shouldn't have been allowed to have. *Hannibal is a monster*, he thought, desperate, *but you're a monster too*.

"You are averse to wickedness," Hannibal observed, his timbre husking, sleep-rough but characteristically calm, "and yet no one could ever be more so." He seemed to weigh, for a moment, the idea of refusing Will an answer. Though Hannibal's face was impassive, the shallow hollows beneath his eyes told of a tiredness that went beyond even his refined control. Hannibal knew perhaps more than Will did how very alike they were to one another. He must have known that, given the chance, Will would pin this weakness like a butterfly pressed beneath glass, picking at it until its flimsy wings ceased to struggle and flap. In the end, Hannibal must have known—his only option was ever concession.

Smiling, ever so slight, at the way Will began to scowl, Hannibal allowed, "We all carry idealized versions of the ones we are moved to love, whether by our choosing or the circumstances surrounding that love. Mischa was not my child, but she was, for a time, my ward; something I was not, precious for what she represented to me as a boy undergoing great change. I *became* both before and after Mischa, as you became both before and after Il Mostro di Firenze. That path would never have opened to her."

The great dark of the cabin moved around them, and gentling, Hannibal's slow-forming words became a reassurance, one felt more than heard as it was bled from his mouth. "You must understand that blood and breath are only elements undergoing change to fuel your radiance. It is not something that I—" An inhalation, sharp in its revelation. "You are not something that I could ever have hoped or accounted for."

I want someone who will understand.

Is it so hard to accept—that I am you, and you are me?

The slightest give in pressure sent this final admittance escaping upward into the air, where it dissipated, soon after, with no more than a passing exhale. It filled Will's head to the brim,

and his next intake of breath brought a coolness into his throat that tasted, airily, of brine and bubbling foam. Where a curtain of black had fallen over the cabin seats, he then caught a glimpse, a vision most complete: it was the outstretched gesture of his dad's hands first seen the previous night—trembling, dutiful, and hurting—and just as pus spilt from the shining, slick liver proffered there, another streetlight bore through the blinds, revealing the sad face and softer attention hovering overhead as belonging not to his dad, but to Hannibal.

Accept, or deny it to be wholly true?

The association did not sit well within Will's mind, and for all the life of him, he could not pinpoint why.

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